

Raspberry Ripple Murder
Killer Cupcakes Book One
By Abby Byne

GELIA KINSEY WRITING AS
ABBY BYNE

RASPBERRY RIPPLE
MURDER



NOTE: BY CELIA KINSEY WRITING AS ABBY BYNE.

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Chapter One

"So how does it feel?" Liz asked as she peeked her head around the swinging door that separated the kitchen from the bakery storefront.

Bitsie dipped her finger into the luscious raspberry-flavored cupcake batter in the bowl in front of her and answered her sister-in-law's question with one her own.

"How does what feel?"

"How does it feel to be a small-business owner?" Liz asked.

"Oh, you saw the new sign up out front. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course, I don't mind," Liz answered. "It's a beautiful sign, and it makes me happy to see your name up there instead of my own."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure," Liz insisted. "You bought this place fair and square. Stan and I will put that money to excellent use, I can tell you. Now that Stan's taken early retirement, we can travel more. I'm relieved you took the place off our hands."

Bitsie let the matter rest. She shouldn't worry about what Liz would think about her taking down the sign that read, "Lizzy's Sweets" and putting up another that said, "Bitsie's Bakeshop." After all, it was her own place now.

Bitsie smiled at her sister-in-law and passed her a spoonful of batter.

"It's something new I'm trying," Bitsie said. "I thought I'd call it raspberry ripple. What do you think?"

"I think it's delicious. Of course, you never can tell until it comes out of the oven."

"True. This is my eighth batch. We tried them out on customers today and they were pretty popular, so I suppose I should give up fine-tuning the flavors at some point."

"Is that lemon zest in there?" Liz asked.

"Yes. Isn't it lovely?"

It was lovely. It was all lovely. The sweet scent of the cupcakes on the cooling racks, the chatter of customers filtering through the swinging door, the feeling of being back in the town she'd grown up in surrounded by people who loved her and, best of all, having 1,873 miles between her and Robert, the man who'd promised to love, honor and cherish—

Bitsie blinked back tears. That had been happening a lot lately, the urge to cry.

"Oh, Bitsie," Liz said, coming and wrapping her arms around her sister-in-law. "I'm so sorry you're having to go through all this."

"Can't be helped. I have no regrets. I did everything I could."

"I know you did," Liz said. "You're a better woman than I am. I wouldn't have even considered taking that rotten cheating rat back. I think you must be some kind of saint."

"Hardly. And you don't know what you'd do," Bitsie said. She pulled away and began pouring batter into the cupcake pans. Bitsie appreciated the sympathy, but the problem with sympathy was that it always ended up making her even more emotional than she already was.

"If there's one thing I've learned from this whole horrible ordeal," Bitsie continued, "it's that it's never safe to say what you'd do in any situation until you've actually gone through it."

"I suppose." Liz looked doubtful. "The one thing I've learned from watching Ro—"

Liz paused, hesitant to go on.

"It's OK. You're allowed to say his name. It's not as if we can just pretend it didn't happen," Bitsie reassured her.

"I'll just say that the one thing I've learned is how true that old saying is, that one about Old Fools," said Liz.

"What saying?"

"You know the one: 'There's no fool like an old fool'."

"I rather take exception to that," Bitsie protested, but she was laughing. "Robert's only two years older than I am, and I don't think 52 is exactly geriatric—"

"Robert may not be teetering on the brink of old age, but how could he leave you for—" Liz trailed off again.

Bitsie slipped the pans of raspberry ripple cupcakes into the oven and turned to face her sister-in-law. "—for a woman young enough to be his daughter, you mean?"

"Yes," said Liz. "That's literally what Robert did. She's 25. That's a whole year younger than Emily!"

"At least my daughter turned out to have better taste in men than I did. Emily picked a good one when she picked Bradley, thank goodness. At least I don't have to worry about her."

"I don't know," said Liz. "I like Bradley, too. But I was convinced that you'd picked a good one when you picked Robert."

"He was a good one, back then."

"That's not a very reassuring thought." Liz frowned. "If Stan ever did anything like that to me—"

"My brother would never—how about we talk about something more pleasant," Bitsie suggested.

"Alright," said Liz. "How about when you're done with this test-bake, you leave the closing up to your able assistant, and take me over to see your new place?"

"Do you think Jack would mind?"

"Someone talking about me?" Jack smiled as he came in the door from the shop.

"I'm kidnapping Bitsie," said Liz, "as soon as those raspberry ripples come out of the oven. I told her you were good to close up on your own."

"Sure," said Jack with an amiable smile on his face.

Bitsie tried not to stare. She almost succeeded. The man was just so spectacularly good-looking. With his blond hair and green eyes and tan skin, Jack would have looked a lot more at home on a beach somewhere than he did in the bakery.

"See! I told you Jack was the best hire I ever made," Liz insisted. "Been with me eight years, and now he's all yours."

"I'm all hers, am I? Can't say I mind that." Jack smiled a bit too broadly, and Liz punched him playfully on the arm.

"Bitsie is a married woman, you know," Liz pointed out, "for two or three more days, anyway."

Bitsie blushed a furious red. Jack looked at her and smiled even more broadly. Liz and Jack were teasing her, she knew, but it seemed so inappropriate, a man of 40 flirting with a woman 10 years his senior, never mind that woman was his boss.

Bitsie struggled to regain her composure. She shouldn't take it seriously. She was sure Jack didn't mean her to. Stan might have left her for a 25-year old, but she, Bitsie Harman (soon to be Bitsie George again after 27 years), was not going to look like a fool by flirting with a man a decade younger than herself.

"Oh, Bitsie," said Liz, as Jack ducked back out to the shop with a tray of maple nut cupcakes to replenish the case, "I forgot to tell you, the landlord called me today—I told him he should be calling you, but I guess he forgot to put your number in his phone."

"What did he want?"

"He's been promising for ages to upgrade the electrical system in the building, and he's finally following through. He's found a contractor willing to work his crew nights, so it won't interfere with business."

"Does he know that Hector and Anabel come in at three in the morning to start baking?"

"He said that shouldn't be a problem. The electricians will come in right after closing and leave by three."

Bitsie was out front washing the windows when Jack came rushing outside.

"I got them out of the oven before they actually caught fire," Jack said, "but I'm afraid half of your latest test-batch of raspberry ripples is ruined."

She'd taken out the first half of the batch and put in the second half but had forgotten to set the timer! Bitsie followed Jack into the kitchen to view the remains of her burnt raspberry ripples. They were a charred mess.

"Do you think there's any hope of salvaging the pans?" Bitsie asked Jack.

"Where there's life, there's hope," said Jack philosophically. "You might try leaving them to soak in the sink for a while."

By the time Bitsie fell into bed that evening, she was exhausted.

She had left the closing-up to Jack, just as Liz had suggested. She was lucky to have inherited such an experienced and competent staff. Bitsie might be a whiz at baking, but she didn't know the first thing about running a business. That didn't seem to matter. She had the best team a person could hope for.

Bitsie lay awake, staring at the ceiling of her tiny bedroom in her tiny cottage. Everything about it was small, right down to the neat yard overflowing with rose bushes and the miniature vegetable patch in the back.

Her cat, Max, lay curled up at the end of her bed, resting against her feet like a giant fur-covered hot water bottle. She could hardly believe that it had only been a week since she'd moved out of the huge house she and Robert had built on a beautiful piece of land just outside of Tucson at the base of the Santa Catalina mountains. That house had been her dream home. On the day she and Robert had moved into that dream house nine years ago, Bitsie could never have imagined she'd have been happy to leave it and move back to her hometown of Little Creek, Arkansas.

When Bitsie had left Little Creek to go off to college, she had vowed that she'd never return, but here she was again. Life was funny that way, turning things around and making you do things you'd sworn you never would.

As Bitsie drifted off to sleep, she wondered if what her raspberry ripple cupcake recipe needed to be absolutely perfect might be a subtle hint of nutmeg

Bitsie was jolted awake by the ringing of her phone. The clock on the nightstand read 3:10 AM.

"Who in the world could that be?" she asked Max. Max, never one to be excitable, merely opened one eye to look at her and then closed it again.

"Hello!"

"Bitsie?"

"Who is this?"

"It's Hector."

Hector. Of course. Hector and Anabel would be at the shop starting the early morning bake, but what could have gone so wrong that he felt the need to call her up at three in the morning?

"Is something wrong?" Bitsie asked. She was sitting up in bed now, fully awake.

"Well—"

There was a long pause on Hector's end. At the end of the bed, Max stood up and stretched luxuriously before turning a complete circle and lying down again.

"Are you ok?" Bitsie asked, "Has something happened to Anabel?"

"We're both fine."

"What's happened?"

Maybe the kitchen had caught fire. Maybe someone had smashed the plate-glass windows at the front of the shop and cleaned them out down to the last crumb. Maybe—

"You'd better come down here," said Hector. "The police are here. Liz and Stan are on their way. I figured you'd want them to come, seeing how new—"

"Why are the police—"

"One of the electricians is dead," said Hector, his voice quavering.

Chapter Two

"I sort of know Marco—knew him," Hector said. He'd been crying. "My wife knows the woman Marco was seeing. Her name is, Jennifer. Jennifer and my wife went to high school together. Jennifer has had a very hard life. She's been a widow twice."

The ambulance had arrived before Bitsie got there, and Marco had already been loaded onto a stretcher, a sheet draped over his lifeless body. Bitsie was relieved that she'd arrived too late to see the condition of the poor man's remains. What did an electrocuted person look like, anyway? Bitsie decided that she'd really rather not know. She didn't deal well with trauma; she couldn't even watch police procedurals on television without covering her ears and burying her face in a pillow when it came time for the scene where they find the body.

"I'm so sorry, Hector," Bitsie said. "What happened, exactly?"

"The police keep calling it an accident," Hector said, lowering his voice.

"Police?" Bitsie looked around for an officer, but there wasn't one.

"Six of them showed up. Every man on duty in the town of Little Creek, I'm guessing. But they've all come and gone already," said Anabel.

"I think one of them is still out front in his cruiser, waiting to follow the ambulance to take Marco to the hospital," said Hector.

"Hospital?" Bitsie asked.

"They have to take him there so a doctor can sign off on a death certificate," said a voice at her elbow. She turned around. It was her brother Stan, looking every bit the retired police officer that he was.

"Has anyone notified his family?" Bitsie asked.

"They asked me to do it," said Stan.

"I thought you retired last month," said Bitsie.

"I'm still technically on the rolls as a reserve officer," Stan explained, "so they can ask me to do stuff."

"But you can say no, right?"

"Yeah, I could," said Stan. "But some of the younger officers, they aren't too good at things like this. It's hard, you know. No matter how many times you've done it, it's hard."

Bitsie reached out to give her brother a big hug. He was such a good man. There were bad apples out there; people who went into law-enforcement, so they could throw their weight around, but Stan was most certainly not one of those people.

"Who found Marco?" Bitsie asked, as Stan walked out the door on his way to perform the sad duty of visiting Marco's family and telling them the tragic news.

"Hector and I found him together," said Anabel. "We came in the backdoor, like usual, but when we hit the switch the light wouldn't come on—"

"It's absolutely certain that he was electrocuted?" Bitsie asked.

"Yes," said Anabel. "We used the flashlights on our cell phones to look around and found him on the floor next to the sink." She pointed in the direction of the sink. On the wall next to the sink, where an outlet had been until quite recently, was an open receptacle box, wires hanging out.

"I can't believe it," Hector said. "Marco was a very careful worker. He was so careful that his crew was always teasing him—that's what Danny said."

"Danny?"

"The other electrician who was working here last night," Hector answered.

"It was very late," Anabel pointed out. "I know I make lots more mistakes when I get really tired."

"But how did it happen?" Bitsie asked.

"He must have been replacing that outlet. It's been broken for a long time. We haven't used it in ages," said Anabel.

"Marco was over there?" Bitsie asked, pointing to a spot next to the sink. There was a puddle of water on the floor. She was pretty sure that wasn't normal.

"Where is the breaker box?" Bitsie asked.

"Back of the storage closet," Anabel answered. "Hector called Danny, the guy who'd been working with Marco earlier in the evening, and Danny put things back together enough for it to be safe to get the power turned back on. Danny's the one who capped those wires off."

Anabel pointed to the wires hanging out of the receptacle box next to the sink. The tip of each wire was now covered with a plastic wire nut.

"The wires were just bare when we came in and found him," Anabel said.

"Show me the panel," said Bitsie.

Bitsie, Hector and Anabel stood in the storage room facing the electrical panel.

"See that big handle at the top?" Hector said.

But Bitsie wasn't looking at the electrical panel. There was a crunching underfoot. She knelt down to take a closer look.

"What's this?" she asked, picking up a shard of glass. She looked up at the wall. High up, near the ceiling was a small wood-framed casement window, big enough for a man to get through, but just barely. One of the panes in the window was broken out and window was unlatched and swinging free on its hinges.

"Oh, that. I forgot to mention that," said Anabel. "It looks like someone threw a rock through it."

"But there's no rock in here," Bitsie pointed out.

"Yeah, I know."

"Did the police take pictures of that, too?"

"I don't know," said Hector. "They didn't seem to think it had anything to do with the accident."

"I'll get a broom and sweep up the glass," said Anabel, as Bitsie shrugged and turned her attention back to the electrical panel.

"That handle at the top is supposed to keep power from flowing to the rest of the panel," said Hector. "It was turned off when we got here, but all the smaller breakers, the ones that feed the individual circuits, those were turned on."

"Even the one that feeds the circuit for the outlet box Marco was working on?" Bitsie asked.

"Yes."

"Danny swears that when he left at around two the main breaker was turned on. It'd have to have been turned on for them to have had light in here, but Danny swears up and down that the power to that outlet circuit was switched off. He said he couldn't imagine Marco turning it back on, so he'd end up working with live wires."

"What did Danny say about the main breaker being tripped?"

"He said that the main breaker could have tripped when the current went through Marco into the wet floor," said Anabel.

"Was Marco lying in the water?"

"Yes," said Anabel. "He was lying sort of half-in and half-out of that puddle by the sink. Just underneath the outlet box."

"Wouldn't an electrician normally clean up a wet floor before working?"

"He probably would have," said Anabel, "if he could have found the mop."

"It's not in the bucket?"

"No," said Anabel. "We've looked for it everywhere."

"What about rags?" Bitsie asked.

"We can't find those, either," said Anabel. "There should have been a whole stack on the shelf in the storeroom, which was left unlocked because that's where the electrical panel is."

"What about paper towels? He could have used those," said Bitsie.

"We are out of paper towels everywhere except the bathroom," Anabel insisted. "There's a roll in there, but it's almost used up."

"But we just got a whole new case of paper towels," said Bitsie. "I clearly remember Jack putting it in the office."

"Jack always locks the office up in the evening, after he transfers the money from the register to the safe," said Anabel. "Marco wouldn't have known where to look for them, and, even if he'd known they were in there, he couldn't have gotten to them."

"It's weird for the mop and the rags to have gone missing like that," Bitsie said.

"It is, but there's something even stranger," said Hector. "Marco had something in his hand."

"He was working, he'd have had a tool in his hand," said Bitsie.

"It wasn't a tool, though," Anabel said. "When we found him, there was a pair of pliers and a pair of wire cutters on the floor beside him. The rest of his tools were still in the tool box, right over there." She pointed to a box of tools sitting next to the sink, just outside the puddle and still very much in their case.

"Then what was he holding?" Bitsie asked.

"It was the weirdest thing," said Anabel. "He was holding a half-eaten cupcake."

Five in the morning was way too early to be up and working, Bitsie thought. Still, she'd better get used to bakers' hours.

Hector and Anabel were back in the kitchen, just now getting the morning bake underway. They were hours behind schedule, but Anabel assured Bitsie that there were enough cupcakes in the display out front to get them through the early-morning rush.

Bitsie desperately needed to get off her feet, so when Liz and Stan materialized at the back door, she welcomed the excuse to sit down at one of the tiny tables at the front of the shop for a cup of coffee and a chat.

"Do you really think it was an accident?" Bitsie asked her brother. "Have you ever seen anything like this before, in all your years on the force?"

"The responding officers believe it was an accident," said Stan. "They took a few pictures and poked around the electrical box before they let Danny put everything back together, just so they'll have something to put in the report, but I don't think they plan on opening any kind of investigation."

"But Hector says—"

"Hector is in shock," Liz pointed out. "He knew Marco a little. Of course, Hector doesn't want to believe—"

Liz looked over at Stan.

"Hector doesn't want to believe what?" Bitsie asked.

"It was something Hector said when he found the body," said Liz. "Anabel told me."

"What did he say?"

"When they found him, Hector said something about how he couldn't believe the idiot went through with it, and then he started sobbing and said something about how he couldn't believe that he'd do that to Jennifer."

"Hector did mention a Jennifer," said Bitsie. "Said she was Marco's girlfriend and that she'd already lost two husbands."

"Anabel thought what Hector meant was that Marco might have caused the accident on purpose," Liz explained.

"Why would he want to do that?" Bitsie asked.

"Suicidal people have been known to make their deaths look like accidents," said Stan. "Sometimes they do it so their family won't know, and sometimes they do it so their loved ones can still get their life insurance money."

"Insurance fraud? That seems pretty unlikely," said Bitsie.

"I agree with you," said Liz. "Why would a healthy man in his thirties think he was worth more dead than alive?"

"Stan, do you think you could ask around the station in a few days to see if there are any developments?" Bitsie asked. "I doubt the police will tell the rest of us, or even the family, too much, but they'll talk to you."

"You think just because I'm a retired officer—"

"Semi-retired, it appears," Liz said wryly, shaking her head. "I knew something like this would happen. I knew you couldn't give up work cold-turkey."

"Well," said Stan, ignoring Liz, "I'm not at all sure there's any evidence of a crime to be found, and even if there is, I'm not sure that anyone's going to be looking for it."

"Maybe someone should be," Bitsie said. "I think it's just bizarre that he died with a cupcake in his hand."

"When we came in, Marco was still lying where they'd found him," said Liz. "I saw that cupcake in his hand. I did think that was strange."

"Was the hand holding the cupcake in the water? Was it all soggy, or is there a chance that we might be able to still find it intact?"

"I'm pretty sure that hand was lying out of the water," said Liz. "It's strange the things you don't even notice until you try picturing something in your mind later on."

"Does it seem normal that a man with a reputation for being a methodical worker would be holding a cupcake in one hand and messing around with wires using the other?" Bitsie wondered aloud.

"That would certainly seem to rule out the possibility that he touched the live wires intentionally," said Stan. "A man who is saying his last prayers typically wouldn't be pilfering cupcakes."

"Maybe it wasn't a pilfered cupcake," Bitsie suggested. "Jack was still here when they arrived yesterday evening. He was the one who let them in. Maybe he offered the electricians a snack."

"That does sound like something he would do," Liz said.

"It's an easy matter to find that out," said Bitsie. "All I have to do is ask Jack."

"I wonder what happened to that half-eaten cupcake?" Liz said.

"The police might have carried it off with the body," suggested Bitsie.

"Someone probably threw it in the trash," said Stan. "I can hardly say they were being careful to collect evidence, not that I'm entirely convinced they'll be wishing they had."

"I'm going to take a look," said Bitsie. "See if I can find it."

"What would a half-eaten cupcake tell you, even if you do find it?" Liz asked.

"I have no idea," said Bitsie, "But I won't have a chance to find out if it goes out with the trash this morning."

"My little sister," said Stan, smiling for the first time since they'd all been awakened to the horrible news of the accident. "Fifty years old and still playing Nancy Drew!"

Chapter Three

Bitsie didn't find the half-eaten cupcake, although it wasn't for lack of looking. The kitchen trash cans had been emptied at closing the previous evening and contained next to nothing.

She did find a plate of cupcakes on top of the fridge. There was one chocolate, one maple nut and one raspberry ripple, but all three were untouched. Even if someone had taken a cupcake out of the hand of a dead man, they would hardly have put it back on a plate.

She took the garbage can from under the checkout counter—which seemed to have been overlooked when the rest were emptied—out to the alley as soon as it got light enough to see and emptied it onto a sheet of clean cardboard she found tucked behind the dumpster. There was no sign of a half-eaten cupcake, although someone had tossed out a perfectly good screwdriver. She had just set aside the screwdriver and was starting to bag everything back up when Jack arrived to open.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a half-eaten cupcake."

"May I ask why?"

"It has to do with the accident this morning. Liz told you what happened?"

"Yes, that's why I came in a little early. But what does a half-eaten cupcake have to do with anything?" Jack asked.

"The poor man was holding it when he died."

"Strange," said Jack. "I offered them a plate of cupcakes before I left. Danny took one, but Marco didn't want any." Jack pointed at the pile of trash Bitsie had been sorting through. "You do realize you've been dumping trash all over someone's bed."

"What?"

"That cardboard. It belongs to Bill."

"Who's Bill?"

"I gather you haven't met Bill. Homeless guy who lives back here, basically. Says he likes the smell of cupcakes."

"He's not umm—dangerous or anything is he?"

"Bill? Nah. Drunk a lot of the time, but gentle as a lamb. He's usually asleep 'til 10, over there behind the dumpster," said Jack.

"I wonder where he is now?"

"Bill was here last night when I left. The back door to the kitchen was propped open, and he was hanging around back there with his dog. I offered him the left-over cupcakes, but he didn't want any, either. He always goes on about how he loves the smell of baking, but never wants to eat any. No sign of him this morning, though."

Jack shrugged and went back inside. Bitsie returned to dealing with the contents of the trashcan.

Jack wasn't inside for long. Bitsie was just putting the last of the trash back into the bag when Jack came back out and said, "You'd better come inside and take a look at something."

The cash register had been pried open. There wasn't much damage to the drawer, but that might explain the screw-driver Bitsie had found dropped in the trashcan. Bitsie peered into the drawer of the open register. The slot for twenties was empty, but there were still tens, fives, ones, and a full assortment of coins.

"Isn't it a bit strange for someone to go through the effort of prying open the register and then only take the twenties?" she said.

"That's what I thought," Jack agreed.

"How much was in there?" Bitsie asked Jack.

"I always leave two-hundred dollars to open with. I put the rest in the safe last night."

"I'd better check the safe. Why don't you count up what's left in there and see how much they took?"

The safe was undisturbed, although, any thief who hadn't spent a lot of time hanging around the place would have had a hard figuring out they even had one. To open the safe, Bitsie had to move the case of paper towels, a broken folding chair and an empty trashcan into the hall

"I thought we just opened these?" said Bitsie, gesturing at the case of paper towels. There sure seemed to be a lot missing.

"Anabel didn't tell you?" said Jack as he walked in. "They had to use half the case this morning just to get that puddle of water by the sink cleaned up."

"So, the mop and the towels still haven't turned up?"

"Not that I know of, but I don't think that anybody's had time yet to make a thorough search for them."

Jack was interrupted by the tinkling of the bell out front, which signaled that they had their first customer of the day. Searching for the mop would have to wait. Bitsie looked down at her hands, they were filthy, certainly not the hands of a reputable baker.

"I'd better go back out front—" said Jack.

Bitsie had just finished scrubbing her hands and was in the process of refilling the paper towel dispensers when Jack returned to find Bitsie.

"You'd better come back out here," he said. "We just had an irate customer come and go, and I can't say that I blame them for being upset."

Bitsie followed Jack out to the front. He motioned for her to step behind the counter and pointed to the glass shelves which held the display of cupcakes sitting in neat rows inside the antique glass bakery case.

"I don't get it," said Bitsie, staring at the cupcakes. "What's the problem?"

"Look closer," said Jack.

Bitsie got down on her knees and pulled a red velvet cupcake from the case and looked at it.

"There's nothing wrong with it," she insisted.

"No, there isn't anything wrong with that one," said Jack, "but take a closer look at the one next to it."

Bitsie took another look and this time she saw what Jack—and their irate customer—had already noticed: in every single row of cupcakes on the top shelf there was one cupcake with a bite taken out of it.

"Is this somebody's idea of a practical joke?"

"Normally, that's that what I'd think," said Jack, "but because of what happened last night, it's hard not to wonder if it means something."

"What could it possibly mean?"

"I have no idea, but I do know that we'd better get this case emptied before any more customers come in."

"Wait!" said Bitsie, as Jack dragged the trashcan over and prepared to dump a tray of cupcakes into it.

"I don't think we should be serving any of these."

"That's not what I meant. I don't think we should be serving them, either," said Bitsie. "But what if you're right? What if all these bitten-into cupcakes mean something?" She pulled her phone from her pocket. "Don't move anything until I take some pictures."

A little after ten, Hector came out from the kitchen into the shop. Although they'd been busy all morning, the shop was empty for the moment.

"I've been talking to my friend Luke, the one who works—worked—for Marco, and he says he knows who did it."

"You mean he thinks someone murdered Marco?"

"Yes. He's sure of it."

"But I got the impression that you thought Marco might have staged the accident himself," said Bitsie.

"Oh?"

"It was something you said to Anabel when you guys found him."

"Oh, that. I did think that might be what happened, right at first," said Hector.

"What made you think that?"

"It was something my wife said a couple of weeks ago. She'd seen Marco's girlfriend Jennifer at a class reunion, and Jennifer had said something about how Marco was really sick, and how she didn't want to lose another man."

"Jennifer is a widow?"

"Yeah, she's had two husbands die. They both had cancer. She wasn't married long to either one of them. Some people just have really bad luck, I guess."

"So, your wife got the impression that Marco was really sick?"

"Yeah. Jennifer didn't go into details, but it seemed to my wife like Marco might be dying or something. I don't know if that's true, though, 'cause Luke thinks somebody killed Marco and made it look like an accident."

"Your friend Luke should be telling the police that," Bitsie said.

"Luke told them already, but he doesn't think they took him seriously."

"I can see why he's upset, if that's what he really thinks, but—"

"He's going to be here in 10 minutes."

"Here?"

"Yes. I called Stan, too."

"I don't—" Bitsie started to protest, but then she saw Hector's face and realized that what she should have done was send him home. He shouldn't be working.

"Why don't you go home early," she said. "Better yet, why don't you take the next three days off. We'll be able to manage without you for that long. Think of it as paid leave. You've had a nasty shock, and you need time to recover."

Hector did not refuse. He was gone before Luke and Stan arrived.

Luke had worked for Marco his whole career as an electrician, he said, and there was no way that someone like Marco would make the kind of stupid mistake that had killed him.

"But you told Hector that you believe you know someone who might have wanted to kill Marco," Bitsie said.

Luke seemed sincere enough, but accusing someone of murder? And based on what evidence? Still, there was no reason not to hear the man out, especially since the police hadn't seemed to take his fears seriously.

"Yeah, I do know someone who might have killed him," Luke insisted. "I'll tell you how I know—"

"Be careful what you say," warned Stan. "Going around saying somebody might be a murder is serious business."

Luke shrugged off Stan's warning and continued. "We have—had—this dude working for us," Luke began. "Nobody liked him, right from the start. His work was O.K., but he had a mean streak. He'd go off—"

"What's this man's name?" said Bitsie. If she was going to become even more entangled in this whole sad affair, she'd at least like to get her facts straight.

"Monty Burge. Anyway, he finally took it too far and hurled a hammer at my head. Said I'd stole something out of his tool box."

"Did he hit you?" Stan asked.

"No, he missed. Could have killed me, throwing a hammer at my head like that. Anyway, Marco fired him on the spot."

"How did that go?" Bitsie asked.

"Not well. Monty called Marco (and me) every name you can think of, then he said something to Marco that I'll never forget: 'you'd better watch your back, Hernandez'."

"That's hardly a specific threat," Stan pointed out.

"There's more," said Luke. "Monty's one scary dude. After he went off on me like that, I did some digging around on him, and you know what I found out? He done time."

"For what?" Bitsie asked.

"He tried to kill somebody! That's why he done time," Luke's voice was rising. He hadn't touched the strawberry caramel cupcake that Bitsie had set in front of him, although he had been punctuating his tale with distraught swigs of black coffee.

"Who did he try to kill?" Bitsie asked. "How do you know?"

"I talked to Monty's Ex," Luke answered. "Went straight to her house this morning. Me and my girlfriend did. We went together. Monty's Ex, she thinks he done it, too. I told her what I thought, and she agreed with me. She thinks he could've done it."

"I'll look into it," said Stan. "I can find out what convictions Monty has had, anyway. Keep in mind, though, that no matter what Monty Burge has done in the past, it doesn't mean he had anything to do with this."

"Luke, you weren't here at the bakery at all last night, were you?" Bitsie asked.

"No, it was just Danny and Marco on this job yesterday. Danny called me this morning. Kicking himself he didn't stick around. Could have kept Marco from getting himself killed."

"Do you have Danny's number?" Bitsie asked Luke. "Maybe we should talk to him directly."

Danny was easy to track down, in fact, he agreed to meet Bitsie for supper at the diner around the corner.

The next step was locating the potentially-murderous Monty. Since no one seemed to have a number for Monty Burge, Bitsie decided to try Monty's Ex, whose number had been given to Bitsie by Luke.

Monty's Ex answered on the first ring and wasn't reticent to talk.

"I don't know where he is," she said. "I've been trying to reach him since yesterday. He's supposed to have visitation with the kids today, but he don't answer. Even his mother don't know where he is. At least, that's what she says, but she lies sometimes. Monty was supposed to come with her to pick the kids up, but he never showed."

"When was the last time anybody saw him?" Bitsie asked.

"I talked to him yesterday, middle of the afternoon. I needed to know when he was going to pick up the kids this morning. He and their grandma, they were planning to go out to Brink's Lake. Monty likes going there. Spends half his life out there, seems like. He likes takin' the kids fishing. Their grandma, she always goes with 'em. Has too. That's what the judge said. Otherwise he can't see 'em no more."

"Please call me, if you hear from him," Bitsie said.

"You think he done it?"

"Done it? You mean killed his boss? Of course not," Bitsie insisted, but she was convinced of nothing of the kind.

Chapter Four

After talking to Monty's Ex, Bitsie took another crack at tracking down the half-eaten cupcake. According to Stan, who'd checked with the officer who'd taken the body to the local funeral home—the only one in Little Creek and which doubled as the morgue—there had been no half-eaten cupcake taken away with the body. So, if the cupcake hadn't been in the trash that morning, and it hadn't been taken off the premises, then it had to still be there somewhere.

Bitsie went into the office and grabbed a yardstick tucked between the desk and the wall. She took it out to the kitchen and knelt down next to the ovens across from the sink where Marco had met his untimely demise. The ovens set up off the floor by several inches. Bitsie shoved the yardstick into the gap between the tiled floor and the ovens and made a careful sweep.

The first sweep yielded a lot of lint, a petrified stick of gum, a pencil and a discarded hairnet, but no cupcake.

Bitsie tried another sweep, this time from the opposite direction.

Bingo! She'd found it. Bitsie picked up the slightly-linty raspberry ripple cupcake. It must be the one. It appeared fresh enough to have been baked only yesterday.

Bitsie looked at the cupcake more closely. Contrary to Anabel and Hector's description of it being "half-eaten," it was not. There was only a single large bite taken out of it, and that single large bite looked very much like the bites that had been taken out of all those cupcakes in the display case.

Bitsie shook her head. Had Marco become temporarily deranged? Taking one bite out of every row of cupcakes in a bakery display case was either the actions of an immature practical joker or a crazy person; it certainly wasn't responsible or professional.

Yet everyone agreed that Marco was both, so maybe it wasn't Marco who had taken the bites out of all those cupcakes, but if it hadn't been Marco—then who had it been?

Bitsie met with Danny—Marco's other employee and the last person known to have seen Marco alive—at Bub's Grill. Bub's Grill was just around the corner from Bitsie's Bakeshop, but it was a world away in terms of décor. The decorative motif at Bub's Grill was all pigs, all the time. This fixation with the porcine was merely a reflection of the menu, which followed a similar theme: all pork, all the time. Bitsie ordered honey-smoked ribs and waited for Danny to bring up the reason they were there in the first place.

"I'm still in shock, I think," said Danny. "I can't believe that Marco is gone. He's such a good guy. Everybody liked him."

"Except for Monty," Bitsie pointed out.

"Monty didn't like nobody."

"Luke's convinced that Marco would never have made the kind of mistake that got him killed. Do you agree with Luke?"

"It's hard to know," said Danny. "We all make stupid mistakes, if we get distracted enough."

"Did Marco seem preoccupied when you left him last night?"

"To be honest? Marco hadn't been himself for a while. He'd been real quiet and serious—he's normally a real cheerful guy. It's been like he was worried about something, and he'd been super tired lately, like he hadn't been sleeping too good."

"Did he seem sick?" Bitsie asked. "Did he ever say anything about having a serious illness?"

"Marco? Sick? That guy is as strong as an ox. I've worked for him for years, and I've never known him to take a single sick day."

"But you said you thought he hadn't been sleeping well. It was the middle of the night. Do you think he could have just been so tired that he wasn't thinking straight and turned the power back on to that circuit he was working on without realizing what he was doing?"

"I guess it's possible, but there's something that's really bothering me," Danny continued. "That shock shouldn't have killed Marco. The only reason it did kill him, in my opinion, was because there was all that water on the floor. If everything had been dry, a shock like that might have hurt real bad, but it probably wouldn't have done him in."

"You're sure there wasn't water on the floor earlier in the night?"

"I'm sure it wasn't there when I left at two. At least not a big puddle like that. I'd have noticed that."

"Did you notice any water in the sink, when you left?"

"Yeah. There were pans soaking in the sink."

"When Marco's body was discovered, he was holding a half-eaten cupcake in his hand," Bitsie said. "Does that seem strange to you?" That cupcake probably meant nothing, but its presence was nagging at her. It was so out of place.

"He was eating a cupcake?" said Danny. "I was there when they were taking his body away, but I didn't notice any cupcake. Of course, I was concentrating on getting the power back on, and, to be honest, I tried not to look at the body."

"Did you see Marco eating any cupcakes earlier on?"

"When we arrived to start work yesterday evening your guy—"

"Jack."

"Yeah. Jack offered us a plate of cupcakes, but Marco didn't want any. He said he'd just finished supper. He doesn't really like sweets too much."

"Maybe, later on after you left, he got hungry and changed his mind."

"Maybe," Danny said. He sounded unconvinced. "What kind of cupcake was it?"

"Should that matter?"

"Just tell me, if you know, what kind of cupcake Marco was holding in his hand when he died?" Danny seemed unreasonably agitated over a cupcake.

"I do know, actually," said Bitsie. "I found it this morning under one of the ovens. It was a raspberry ripple."

"No way!" said Danny.

"Why is that so impossible?" Bitsie asked.

"Marco hates raspberries. He said so last night. Went on and on about it. He's hated them ever since he was a little kid. There were three cupcakes left on the plate when I left at two. I'd already eaten one strawberry and one banana cream. Jack went out back— we had the door to the alley propped open—and offered some to that homeless guy who hangs around back there, but he didn't want any, either. I remember there were three left on the plate after I ate the other two. One was chocolate, one was one maple nut and one was raspberry. Was there a plate on the counter with cupcakes on it, when you arrived this morning?"

"There was a plate of cupcakes, but it wasn't sitting out on the counter," said Bitsie. "Someone had stuck a plate of cupcakes up on top of the fridge."

"Oh yeah, I remember doing that. I stuck it up there. It was kind of in the way, and I thought it might get knocked off the counter."

"When I found the plate, there was one chocolate and one maple nut, but the raspberry ripple was still there, too," said Bitsie. "You're absolutely certain that there was only one raspberry ripple cupcake to begin with on the plate that Jack offered you?"

"Yeah. Absolutely. It makes no sense for Marco to choose the one flavor he specifically said he couldn't stand," said Danny. He lowered his voice and glanced at the nearby diners before continuing. "I know Luke thinks that Crazy Monty had something to do with this, but my money's on the girlfriend."

"Monty's girlfriend?"

"No, Marco's. She's the one somebody really ought to be taking a serious look at."

Bitsie didn't want to be the one to intrude on a bereaved woman's grief. She certainly wasn't about to call up a woman who'd just lost her boyfriend in a freak workplace accident and suggest that she'd had something to do with it, but there was no harm in asking around a little. Danny had informed her that Jennifer worked at a hair salon downtown, so the following afternoon Bitsie made an appointment for a haircut.

Bitsie had been meaning to change her style anyway. She wanted a new cut that was short and breezy; she wanted a style that said, "I may have just been dumped by my husband of twenty-seven years, but I'm not letting it get me down."

Did such a haircut exist? Bitsie wasn't sure, but it was worth a try. While she was at it, she'd subtly grill Jennifer's coworkers.

It turned out that no grilling was required. No sooner had Bitsie been seated and swathed and explained to the girl with the scissors what she wanted done to her head, then Jennifer came up in conversation.

"I can't believe she came in yesterday. I couldn't come to work the same day something like that happened," said a blond named Beth. Beth was styling the hair of a woman who appeared to be about 90 and totally deaf. "I know Jennifer's not the sentimental type," Beth continued, "but they'd only barely broken up."

"Shh," Rita, the woman washing Bitsie's hair, protested as she accidentally aimed a stream of water into Bitsie's ear. "So sorry!"

"Don't mind me," said Bitsie. "You're talking about Marco Hernandez, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Rita. "Did you know him?"

"Not exactly," said Bitsie. "But I am involved, I guess. I own the bakery where he died."

Beth dropped her comb, and Rita misdirected another shot of water into Bitsie's face. She swiftly apologized again and applied a towel to Bitsie's dripping cheek.

"What's Jennifer like?" Bitsie asked. "I shouldn't really be telling you this, but there are several people suggesting that Marco's death was not an accident."

The key to getting people to tell you secrets, Bitsie had learned years ago, was to pretend you were telling them one of your own.

"Well—" Beth hesitated. The old lady in her chair appeared to have fallen asleep.

"Well—" said Rita. "We do think it's strange."

"What?" asked Bitsie. "What's strange?"

"Well, Jennifer and Marco met about three months ago, and they got engaged right away," said Rita.

"They were engaged?" This was news to Bitsie.

"Yeah. It was supposed to be very hush-hush. Jennifer said Marco was dying, but we weren't supposed to tell anyone about it."

"Why not?"

"Jennifer said that he didn't want his kids to find out," said Beth.

"Although, if he really was dying it's not like they weren't going to be finding out eventually," Rita interjected.

"Anyway," said Beth. "Like I said, they got engaged really fast, then—"

"About a week ago—" Rita interrupted again.

"Yeah. It was about a week ago. Jennifer came in to work and told us they had broken up. Marco wasn't dying after all, she said, and when she found out he'd been playing her for sympathy, she broke up with him," Rita added.

Beth looked at Rita and Rita looked back at Beth, and they both shook their heads in bewilderment.

"Now isn't that the craziest breakup story you ever heard?" Beth said.

"It's up there," Bitsie agreed. "Is Jennifer coming in to work today?"

"She came. She's gone already. She didn't have any more appointments this evening. I heard her telling someone she was going to the gym," Beth informed Bitsie.

"She hangs out there a lot," Rita added. "Long's Gym. If you go down there, I'm sure you'll see her. She stands out. Look for a woman with big earrings, big hair and bright purple lipstick."

"Purple?" Bitsie asked.

"Yeah, I know." Beth laughed. "Pretty ghastly."

Jennifer was every bit as easy to spot as Rita had suggested. She was wearing big earrings and bright purple lipstick that matched a tiny pair of workout shorts that left very little to the imagination. She was lounging against the front desk flirting with the desk attendant, but when Bitsie went up to the counter, Jennifer gave Bitsie a dismissive glance and sauntered off towards the back of the tiny gym to where a couple of over-pumped guys were dead-lifting.

"Can I help you?" the desk attendant asked.

"Uh...I'm thinking of joining the gym," Bitsie said.

She wasn't, but it was the best she could come up with at short notice. In fact, if she wasn't mistaken, this was the first time she'd stepped inside a gym since she had that tremendous crush on Spencer Wirman back in 1986, the summer before she'd met Robert.

"Didn't expect to see you here," said a voice at her elbow.

Bitsie whirled around. It was Jack. She should've known. There was only one gym the tiny town of Little Creek and it was obvious just from looking at the man that he worked out somewhere. It was equally obvious that she herself did not.

"So, you're joining the gym?" said Jack.

"Uh—" Bitsie giggled nervously. "I could use a little more exercise. Getting a bit, you know, too big for my britches." Bitsie felt her face turning a pink. That was really the wittiest thing she could come up with: an antiquated and completely lame joke about her expanding waist-line? And the giggling, what was with the giggling? She was fifty, not fifteen.

Jack laughed.

Bitsie cringed. If she could have dissolved in a puff of smoke like one of those magician's assistants, she would have. Alas, there was no magician in sight.

"How about I show her around?" Jack suggested to the desk attendant.

"You two know each other?" the desk attendant asked. He looked doubtful. Bitsie didn't blame him.

"According to some people," Jack joked, "this woman owns me."

"Really?" The desk attendant looked doubly doubtful.

Bitsie tugged at Jack's elbow. Why did he have to go and say something like that? It was embarrassing.

"Why don't we start with the weight machines," Jack suggested. "You don't strike me as the free-weight type." He laughed again, revealing a row of perfectly straight white teeth.

Why did Jack have to show up? Sure, he gave her excellent cover to observe Jennifer, but his presence was terribly distracting.

Maybe, Bitsie thought, if she let Jack know what she was up to, he could help her out a little, get her over close enough to hear what Jennifer was talking so earnestly about to one of the men who'd been grunting away with that enormous set of weights.

"Why don't you try out this one first," Jack said.

Bitsie sat down on the seat of a contraption that resembled a medieval instrument of torture.

"We'll start you out with twenty pounds, I think." Jack leaned over to adjust the weight setting and Bitsie took her opportunity.

"I'm not actually here to sign up for the gym," she said in a low voice.

"What?" said Jack.

Bitsie motioned for him to lean in closer. He did. He smelled of soap and baked goods. Bitsie tried to clear her brain and concentrate.

"I'm not here to sign up for the gym," she whispered. "I'm here because that's Marco's fiancée over there." She motioned in Jennifer's direction with a tilt of her head.

Jack looked over at Jennifer. It wouldn't have been necessary to point her out, Bitsie realized. She and Jennifer were the only two women in the place.

"Ex-fiancée," Bitsie amended her statement.

"But why are you spying on her?"

"There have been developments," Bitsie said, "since I talked to you last."

"What developments?" Jack asked. Bitsie ignored his question. It wasn't that she didn't want to tell him, it was just that it was a much-too-lengthy and complicated story to go into at the moment.

"Why aren't you watching the shop?" Bitsie asked. Was nobody there? Anabel had gone home hours ago.

Jack laughed. "Remember, we close up at 6 pm on weekdays."

"Of course, I'm sorry. I'm just a bit distracted."

She looked over at Jennifer, who appeared to be engaged in a silent stand-off with the largest of the weight-lifters. He was a huge man with a wispy little mustache and the look of someone who, despite his size, was used to doing whatever he was told.

"Shall we try that one next?" said Jack loudly, pointing to a machine near Jennifer.

Bitsie settled herself into a seat of a contraption that appeared to have been made for a creature about 10 feet tall and 10 inches wide with a penchant for extreme humiliation.

"I'm supposed to do **what** with my legs?" she asked incredulously, as Jack motioned for her to place her legs in spring-loaded scissor-like contraption.

A few feet away, over by the mirrors, Jennifer and the mustachioed weight-lifter were still not speaking to each other.

Bitsie refrained from protesting the ridiculous position she had to put herself into. It wouldn't do to draw attention to herself.

"You seriously think I could—" Jennifer hissed at the weight-lifter. "I could never—I mean, why would I? Why would I even want to?"

Bitsie craned her head around to see what was happening. If she contorted herself enough, she could get a glimpse of the weight-lifter's expression. She craned her neck around to get a better look at the guy's face. He looked scared—and angry in a mousey sort of way—but mostly scared.

"Money," he hissed back at Jennifer. "I know you. You'd do anything for money. I wish I had never—" He stopped speaking abruptly and dropped his weights on the floor with a tremendous thud, then turned on his heel and left the gym without another word.

Chapter Five

"So, what is going on?" Jack demanded.

They were safely outside now, leaning against Bitsie's car which she'd parked on the street a block away from the gym.

There hadn't been much else to see or hear after the weight-lifter had accused Jennifer of doing it for money (whatever "it" was).

"I'll tell you what is going on," said Bitsie. "There seems to be a lot of people who don't believe that Marco's death was accidental."

"Oh? It is very strange that the cash register was robbed the same evening a man dies in a freak accident—but if someone wanted to knock over a bakery, why wouldn't they have just used a gun or beamed the guy over the head with a tire-iron or something? And, come to think of it, if you're going to bust up a cash register, why leave half the money behind?" said Jack. "Although, I guess whoever was robbing the cash register could have been surprised in the act by Marco and left without the rest of the money?"

"I guess it's possible," said Bitsie, "that Marco might have been so rattled by the intruder that he got distracted and careless and that's why he turned on the power without thinking."

"I suppose." Jack agreed, but he didn't sound convinced. "But if Marco's death wasn't an accident, it was certainly intended to look like one."

"That much seems certain," said Bitsie.

"You really think someone killed him?"

"Yes, and I don't think the killer was the same person who pried open the register."

"The robbery certainly wasn't a very professional job," Jack said. "Tell me what you found out that makes you think that Marco's death might not be just a tragic accident."

"First off, Danny—the other electrician who was on the job last night—swears that the water on the floor wasn't there when he left at two. He also says that without the water on the floor, Marco probably wouldn't be dead."

"What else?"

"Luke, Marco's other electrician, claims that Marco had just fired another guy on their crew for throwing a hammer at someone's head, and, according to Luke, Monty—the hammer thrower—spent several years in prison for attempted murder."

"Where is this Monty, then? Have the police questioned him?"

"That's suspicious, too. I talked to Monty's Ex, and she says she hasn't been able to reach him and he didn't show up for visitation with his kids," said Bitsie.

"Disappearing is suspicious," Jack agreed.

"And he certainly would have known what to do to make it look like an accident."

Bitsie called up Stan that evening, before she went to bed, to see if he'd heard anything.

"Nobody's been able to locate Monty Burge," Stan said, "but Luke's story about Monty's criminal record checks out. Monty was convicted of trying to kill a buddy of his. He very nearly succeeded, too. Happened about 10 years ago, and they put him away quite a while for it. He's only been out a little over a year."

"Monty's Ex also mentioned that he wasn't allowed to see his kids unsupervised."

"There's also that," said Jack. "He's had quite a few domestics. There was a no-contact order for a while—"

"Sounds like a charming guy!"

"My thoughts exactly. Still, there's not much to suggest he had anything to do with Marco's death."

"Except for the fact that he made vague threats and now he's disappeared."

"There is that."

Bitsie hung up the phone, feeling wretched. It was awful enough that Marco had died in her bakery, but if he'd been murdered—she thought of the kids Marco had left behind. There were three of them, according to Hector. Three boys. The youngest was eight and the oldest was twelve. They lived with Marco's ex-wife, Raina.

Bitsie decided she'd go see Raina the next day and extend her condolences. Even if Raina wasn't still married to Marco, she must care for him. Bitsie couldn't imagine how she'd feel if something happened to Robert. She wasn't sure if what she felt for him was still love, but at the very least she'd be devastated that Emily no longer had a father.

Bitsie had a terrible time dragging herself out of bed when her alarm went off. She was glad she hadn't been foolhardy enough to volunteer to take over a permanent spot in the early-morning shift. She wasn't cut out for getting up at two in the morning.

Bitsie was a bit late, and Anabel was already there, hard at work mixing a batch of strawberry caramel cupcakes when Bitsie arrived.

"How are you holding up?" Bitsie asked Anabel, as she fitted a hairnet over her new tousle of curls and took down a clean apron from the hook by the office door.

"OK. I couldn't sleep last night, though. I kept seeing Marco lying on the floor. I see it over and over. I just can't stop replaying the scene."

Bitsie felt sorry for Anabel. Of course, she was traumatized. If she could have managed without her, Bitsie would have sent Anabel home for a few days along with Hector.

"I suppose there will never be a good time to ask you this," Bitsie said, "but I never really heard a complete version of what happened when you came to work that morning."

"It'll be pretty much the same as whatever Hector's told you. We were together the whole time."

"Yes, you and Hector technically saw exactly the same scene, but everyone notices different things. Tell me everything that you saw when you came in the door. No, start earlier. Tell me absolutely everything you can remember from the time you parked your car."

"So, you think it's true, that someone killed that electrician and made it look like an accident?"

"It's looking more and more like that to me."

"Well," said Anabel, turning off the mixer and turning to face Bitsie, "I parked in my usual spot, on the street near the entrance to the alley. Hector pulled up right behind me. He usually gets there before me and waits for me to park so he can walk me in. I get a little nervous walking down the alley at that hour. Not that I worry about that homeless guy, Bill. In fact, I find it comforting that he sleeps back there, almost like having a guard in the alley."

"Did you see Bill in the alley last night?" Bitsie asked.

"I think so. He usually sleeps behind the dumpster, and I can usually see the foot of his sleeping bag sticking out, but the light's not too good back there, so I can't be sure if he was there that night or not."

Bitsie made a mental note to have a light put up back there. A big flood light. She'd call around tomorrow, not that electricians would be clamoring to do work for her after what had happened to the last guy.

"So, you and Hector walked in together—"

"Yes. There was something a little unusual. I tripped over a rock, right before we got to the back door. I didn't think about it much at the time, but I'm thinking someone had been using it to prop the door open; you know how it locks automatically when it shuts."

"I suppose one of the electricians might have done that, so they could bring stuff in and out."

"Yeah, I guess so. The electrician's van was parked back there in the alley."

"Anything else?"

"I smelled cigarette smoke outside the back door."

"Does Bill smoke?" Bitsie asked.

"I don't think so. Nobody who works for the bakery smokes and none of the other buildings that back up to the alley have anyone in them at that hour."

"Maybe Bill had a friend sleeping over," suggested Bitsie. "A friend who smokes."

"Maybe, but I'm not sure Bill was even there. He does that sometimes, disappears for a while. Or maybe he was there and cleared out when the police showed up. He doesn't like policemen."

"Except Stan."

"Oh, yes. He likes Stan. Stan used to go out back and sit with Bill and drink coffee and talk about Iraq."

"Bill's a veteran, too?"

"That's what he says, but then he also claims to have been abducted by aliens. Stan seems to think he's telling the truth about being in Iraq, though."

"Did you see anything else unusual when you came in?"

"The door was locked; I'm sure of that, because I had a little trouble getting my key to work. That sometimes happens."

She'd get in a locksmith, too, Bitsie decided, to replace that lock with one that worked properly. Scratch that. After what had happened, she'd feel better with all the locks changed.

"So, you came inside and tried to turn on the light—"

"Yes," Anabel continued. "Only when Hector hit the switch, the lights didn't come on. We used our cellphones as flashlights, and that's how we found him." Anabel's eyes involuntarily strayed to the place beside the sink, where they'd found Marco.

"And you discovered him lying in a puddle of water?"

"Yeah. There was quite a bit of water there," said Anabel. "But you saw that yourself. Nobody had cleaned up before you got here. There's a dip in the floor. If somebody splashes water when they're washing dishes, it collects. That happens all the time, but I've never once known that sink to leak."

"It's not leaking now," Bitsie pointed out, motioning to the sink full of water.

"It certainly wasn't holding water like that. Jack fixed it first thing after he got here. It was just a loose coupling on the drainpipe. All he had to do was tighten it up."

"What about the mop? Did it ever turn up?"

"Yeah, it was out by the back door the whole time, although nobody will admit to being the one who left it out there."

"Where was it found?"

"I found it right next to the door."

"Which side of the door?"

"Uh, the left side, I think. If you were standing outside about to go in."

"Show me where you found it."

They went out the back. The stone that Anabel had tripped over was still there, and Bitsie wedged it in between the door and the jamb to keep the door from closing. It really was dark out there. If Bill had come back and taken up his habitual spot behind the dumpster, it was impossible to tell.

Bitsie hoped Bill would show up soon. It was the unanimous opinion of every person she'd talked to that he was harmless, but if he had been in the alley the night that Marco died, he might have seen and heard something that could lead them to Marco's killer.

Anabel pointed out where the mop had been found.

"The door swings out into the alley," Bitsie said. "So, if the door were propped all the way open, which it would be if Marco and Danny had been bringing stuff in and out, then the mop would have been hidden behind the open door."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"And you're sure that nobody knows how it got there?"

"No. None of us ever puts the mop outside. We keep it in the bucket next to the utility sink; we've been keeping it there for as long as I've worked here."

Anabel and Bitsie went back inside, carefully closing the door to be sure it was latched securely and set to work on the morning bake. They were already behind, and, as Bitsie was quickly discovering, she might be an expert home-baker, but turning out 50-dozen cupcakes in a couple of hours was a whole different story.

Chapter Six

Bitsie left at nine, shortly after Jack arrived. He gave her a dazzling smile when he came in but made no reference to their chance meeting at the gym the previous evening. Bitsie was covered in flour and flecks of cupcake batter. She still hadn't quite gotten the hang of the industrial mixer.

When Bitsie arrived home, Max was waiting at the door, impatient to be fed. At Max's last check-up, the vet had put his foot down and mandated that Max needed to get his weight under control. Max hated being on a diet, and Bitsie didn't blame him. Who enjoyed feeling half-starved all the time?

She looked down guiltily at her own waist-line. She'd lost a lot of weight at the beginning of her separation from Robert; she hadn't felt like eating a thing. But now she'd gotten her appetite back, and she was on track to gain back all that weight and more. Too many cupcakes, she decided.

She'd better do something about her weight gain, Bitsie thought. It wasn't a vanity thing. There was nothing wrong with being plump as long as she was healthy, but her expanding waistline brought up a practical problem. If she gained much more, she wouldn't be able to fit into any of her clothes.

Buying a whole new wardrobe had a certain appeal, but she really couldn't afford a luxury like that right now. Bitsie had a feeling that she was going to miss getting that regular paycheck she'd enjoyed as one of the few perks of being a drudge-for-dollars at the accounting firm she used to work for back in Tucson.

Bitsie fed Max, giving him a little more kibble than the vet had recommended. To atone for her sins, she ate a stick of celery and downed a glass of hot water with lemon. Then she jumped in the shower, finishing off with a bracing splash of cold water.

After all that virtue, she felt ready to face a visit to Marco's ex-wife.

Raina, the woman who, according to Hector, had spent fourteen years married to Marco, was easy to find. She ran a daycare just a few blocks from Bitsie's cottage. Bitsie called the number for the daycare and got Raina herself.

Raina wasn't exactly warm and friendly when Bitsie explained that she wanted to talk about her ex-husband, but Bitsie couldn't blame her for being less than enthusiastic. In Raina's place, she'd have probably refused point-blank to subject herself to the intrusive sympathy and nosey questions of a random stranger, but Raina didn't refuse.

Raina said she could spare a few minutes in the afternoon, during naptime, when nothing much happened, and her assistants could handle things. She'd meet Bitsie at the pocket park halfway between Bitsie's house and the daycare center.

When Bitsie arrived, on time, for their appointment, Raina was already there. Raina was a beautiful woman, but in a much less flashy way than Jennifer, who wasn't exactly beautiful, but certainly knew how to attract attention to herself.

"You're Stan George's sister, aren't you?" Raina said, as Bitsie settled herself on the bench beside her. "That's the only reason I agreed to talk to you. I don't know Stan personally, but it's a small town. People talk, and he has reputation for being a good cop. He was very kind to my brother a few years back, and he's the one who came to tell Marco's Mom—"

"Were you there, when Stan came and told her?"

"Yeah. The kids spent the night with her, and I'd gone over really early to pick them up. I was glad I was there."

"How are the kids doing?" Bitsie asked.

“Not so good. I’m pretty broken up about it, myself. And it really worries me that there are all these weird rumors going around,” said Raina. “There are people saying he might have been murdered. Other people seem to think he committed suicide. So far, I don’t think the kids have heard any of it, but—”

“What do you think about the rumors?”

“I don’t know what to think. I mean, what do I know? It’s just that—” Raina hesitated.

“It’s just that—what?” Bitsie encouraged her to continue.

“It isn’t common knowledge, but Marco was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor about three months ago.”

Raina paused, fighting back tears, before she continued. “Marco didn’t tell very many people about the diagnosis, but I he told me, and he told Jennifer and that’s what’s so crazy—”

“What do you mean?”

“Just a week or so ago Marco found out that he wasn’t dying after all. He went to another doctor for a second opinion, and that doctor told him it was all a big mistake. They did more scans and said they couldn’t find a thing wrong with him.”

“But I heard—”

“You heard that Jennifer claimed that Marco made the tumor up?”

“Yes,” said Bitsie.

Raina looked surprised. “How did you hear that?”

“The beauty salon. Jennifer’s coworkers aren’t very discreet.”

“He wasn’t making the tumor up,” said Raina. “I’m sure of it. He wasn’t like that. I’ve known him for twenty years. Marco wasn’t always entirely truthful, but he wouldn’t have lied about something like this, not to me or to Jennifer. Besides, I know for sure he wasn’t lying because I talked directly to his first doctor, the one who told him he was dying. Marco asked me to come with him to one of his appointments. Marco thought I should help him decide what to tell the kids.” Raina broke off, struggling to regain her composure. “As soon as I heard Marco was dead, I thought—well, I wondered if Jennifer hadn’t killed him for some reason.”

“But why would she want to?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think there’s any money coming to her. Marco had a life insurance policy, but it was just for the kids.”

“Are you sure that was the only one policy?”

“Yes. Actually, no. I guess he might have taken out another one. He’s always paid his child support on time, and he’s always been very open about anything that might affect our children, but I doubt he’d tell me about taking out a life insurance policy to benefit his second wife.”

“So, Marco and Jennifer really were officially engaged?”

“Oh, yes. They’d set a date and everything.”

“Even if Marco had wanted to take out an insurance policy to benefit Jennifer, I doubt anyone would have written him one,” Bitsie pointed out.

“I know. I thought of that, too. According to Jennifer, she met him after he was diagnosed, but—”

“You’re not so sure?”

“No. I’m not at all sure. It all seemed to happen around the same time.”

“What’s the name of the doctor who diagnosed Marco?”

“A Dr. Montgomery, over in Fayetteville. But I’m sure he won’t talk to you. Patient confidentiality and all that.”

"I know, but I want to find out as much as I can. I'm so sorry you're having to go through all this," said Bitsie. "I know you weren't married to him anymore, but when you've loved someone once—well, you can never completely—"

Raina reached over and wordlessly squeezed Bitsie's hand.

"If I find out anything of significance," said Bitsie, "you'll be the first to know."

Within hours, the police were back at the bakery doing what they should have done to begin with, which was taking a much closer look around. Stan called Bitsie to let her know. His old chief had given him a heads-up when Stan had called in to see if there had been any progress on locating Monty.

"It's officially a homicide investigation now," said Stan.

"What brought them to that conclusion?" Bitsie asked.

"I bugged them about for one thing," said Stan. "They took a look at the tape from the surveillance cameras on that ATM three blocks down from the bakery and what they saw—I should say, who they saw—was very interesting."

"Who did they see?"

"According to the chief, there was an unusual volume of traffic past there for it being two in the morning—the cameras caught Monty Burge in front of the ATM."

"What was Monty doing?"

"That camera only captures a small section of the street, but shortly after two o'clock in the morning a woman driving a large red pickup pulls up to the curb. She gets out. She doesn't go to the ATM, though. She walks out of the frame and doesn't come back to the truck for almost forty-five minutes. The camera isn't angled properly to see the license plate, and the woman is wearing a hoodie, so you can't see her face real well, but going on your description of Marco's ex-girlfriend, it could be her."

"What about Monty Burge?"

"One of the officers who viewed the tape has arrested Monty twice before. He identified Monty right away. Monty's only been out of prison for a little over a year, but he's had a lot of minor run-ins with the law since he'd been out. I don't know that anyone would be willing to testify under oath that they're 100% sure it's him, but yeah, they're pretty sure."

"So, when does Monty show up?"

"About 5 minutes after the woman walks away, Monty pulls up behind the red truck. He's driving a black sedan. He doesn't get out right away. He just sits there in the car for about ten minutes, then he abruptly gets out of the car and hurries away."

"Did the camera catch either of them coming back?"

"Yeah. Monty Burge comes back first. He's running. He jumps in his car and speeds away. Clips a fire hydrant with his front bumper on his way out but doesn't bust it. I checked that out, and, sure enough, there's a bit of black paint on the fire hydrant in front of the ATM."

"When does Monty come back?"

"Around a quarter to three."

"What about the woman?" asked Bitsie.

"It's a few minutes after Monty peels out that she comes back, and she's taking her own sweet time. She saunters up, smoking a cigarette. In fact, she leans against her truck and finishes that one off before she lights up a second cigarette. She's there standing by the truck until well after three."

“By that time, Hector and Anabel had already discovered Marco’s body and the police were on their way,” Bitsie said.

“The police arrived a couple of minutes after I did, and I figure the ambulance beat me by a couple of minutes. The ambulance is actually on the tape, it drives right by the red pickup, sirens and lights going and everything.”

“What does the woman do?”

“Not much. She doesn’t even bother to go round the other side of the truck to watch it go by. A few seconds later the sirens stop—I guess that’s when it arrived at the bakery—and the woman drops her cigarette on the ground, grinds it out with her foot, gets in the truck and drives off.”

“What do you make of all that?” asked Bitsie.

“When Monty eventually resurfaces,” said Stan, “there’s going to be a line of people with badges wanting to ask him questions.”

“What about Jennifer?”

“I expect she’ll be called in, too.”

Chapter Seven

Bitsie could find only one Dr. Montgomery, a Jay Montgomery, in the Fayetteville phone book. When she called the number, she got a cheerful receptionist who informed her that Dr. Montgomery didn't have an open slot for three weeks. No, she wouldn't need a referral from her primary care physician, Bitsie was informed. This seemed very odd for an oncologist.

"Is it possible that I could get in before three weeks, if there's a cancelation?" Bitsie asked.

"I can put you down, but don't get your hopes up," the receptionist warned her. "June is a very big month for births."

Births? Bitsie wondered why a seasonal fluctuation in birthrates should matter to a cancer specialist.

"If you are concerned about getting a checkup before then, I can refer you to another obstetrician," the receptionist continued, "but, generally speaking, for new patients who are early in their pregnancies, she only refers you if you're more than two months pregnant."

"Dr. Montgomery is a woman?"

"Yes."

Clearly, Bitsie had reached the wrong Dr. Montgomery. She was sure that Raina had referred to Dr. Montgomery as "he," and besides, there was a world of difference between an oncologist and an obstetrician. Bitsie incoherently thanked the receptionist and called Raina.

"Would you happen to remember where the clinic was you went to, when you had your appointment with Dr. Montgomery?" Bitsie asked. She could hear the sound of children playing in the background. "It wouldn't happen to be on Oak Street near the Northside Mall, would it?"

"That sounds right."

"Do you remember what Dr. Montgomery's first name was?"

"It was Jay. He had his certificates hung on the wall in the exam room."

"You're absolutely 100% sure that the Dr. Jay Montgomery that you met with was a man?"

"Yes. I don't understand—" said Raina.

Bitsie didn't understand either, but she was starting to have her suspicions.

"Did you notice anything at odds with it being a cancer clinic?" Bitsie asked. "For example: did you see posters on the walls relating to pregnancy or maybe pamphlets in the waiting room about breast-feeding. Anything like that?"

"No," said Raina.

"Did Dr. Montgomery show you anything about Marco's tumor when you went in to see him? Scans or images of any kind?"

"Oh, yes. He showed us scans of Marco's tumor on a tablet while we were in his office."

"Did Marco tell you where he went to get those scans done?"

"No. He just said something about his doctor sending him somewhere to get an MRI."

"Dr. Montgomery sent him?"

"I don't know. I assume so."

"Would you be willing to go back to the clinic where you met with Dr. Montgomery? There's something fishy going on. The only Dr. Jay Montgomery practicing medicine in Fayetteville is a female obstetrician."

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line and then Raina said, "I can be ready to go in 15 minutes."

Raina and Bitsie pulled into a parking space in front of a brick building that backed up to a strip mall. The outside of the building said, "Charter Health" in big metal letters.

"I doubt we'll be able to get a look into the exam room where you met with Dr. Montgomery, although it's worth a try," Bitsie said as they got out of the car and walked towards the building. "Looking for a bathroom is always a good excuse when you're caught poking around where you're not supposed to be, but even if we can't get a look at the exam room, be on the look-out for anything that seems different from the last time you were here."

The waiting room was almost empty, aside from an extremely pregnant woman and a man who looked like an expectant father who'd chickened out at the last minute on going into the exam room with the mother of his child.

The receptionist asked how she could help. Bitsie said they were just here waiting to pick up their sister when she was done with her appointment. The receptionist accepted Bitsie's story without a hint of suspicion. Raina asked if she could use the bathroom while she waited, and the receptionist pointed her down the hall.

Raina wasn't gone long, and, when she returned, she was agitated. Bitsie, who had been pretending to read a magazine, said, a little more loudly than necessary, "We don't need to wait for Sis. Greg just texted me and he's on his way—"

Raina didn't even wait for Bitsie to finish off her little white lie. She grabbed Bitsie by the arm and practically dragged her back out to the parking lot.

"Something's really wrong," Raina said.

"Tell me everything you saw," said Bitsie.

"I want to get out of here first."

They drove a block over to the parking lot of the main mall and sat in the car, with the windows rolled down. It was a warm day, and Bitsie could feel sweat forming on her forehead.

"So many things were different," said Raina. "The door to the exam room we were in last time was open and it was empty, so I peeked my head in. I'm sure it was the same one. It had the same wallpaper, the same chairs, the same framed certificates on the walls."

"What was different, then?" Bitsie asked.

"The posters were all different. When I went in before, it was all these posters of generic things. There was one of a whale jumping and one with a rock climber and one with a basket of kittens. I thought they were kind of strange for a doctor's office, but sometimes, you know, doctors put up stuff like that."

"So, what had changed this time?"

"Those generic posters were all gone. Instead, there were all these posters about the stages of pregnancy and what to eat for a healthy baby and—I saw Dr. Montgomery, too. The real Dr. Montgomery. I am beginning think that man I saw wasn't a doctor at all. He can't have been."

"I'm beginning to think the same thing," said Bitsie.

"Marco was getting scammed," said Raina. "and I must have helped them do it. I feel terrible about that."

"You've been an innocent victim in all this," Bitsie insisted, hoping it was true.

She like Raina. She didn't want to believe that Raina had been wittingly involved in a scam that might very well have turned into a murder, but, unfortunately, it wasn't wise to eliminate any possibility on the strength of finding someone likeable.

But who could be behind such a cruel lie? And why they would want to fool a man into thinking he was dying in the first place? Then there was another possibility: Marco might have made up the lie himself and been the one trying to fool his fiancée or his ex-wife, or, weirder still, both of them.

Stan suggested that the thing to do was try to find out who had been impersonating Dr. Montgomery. When it came to criminal investigations, Stan asserted, once you had the "who" figured out, the answer to the question "why" was easier to unravel.

"But who would even be in a position to pull off a stunt like that?" Bitsie said.

"Does Raina remember there being anyone else at the office when she went there the first time?" Stan asked, "She went there together with Marco, I'm assuming."

"Raina didn't say anything about there being anyone else there, but she did say they went on a Sunday which she thought was a little odd at the time. She remembers Marco telling her that Dr. Montgomery let him come in on Sundays, so he wouldn't miss work."

"Very accommodating doctor," said Stan sarcastically. "Who would have access to a medical clinic on Sundays when no one else was around?"

"A nurse, maybe? Or a receptionist?" Bitsie suggested. "But that doesn't seem very likely. How many male nurses or receptionists work in an obstetrics clinic?"

"It could be a woman with access to the building who colluded with a male accomplice," suggested Stan. "I think we should all go home and sleep on it. As I recall, someone has to be up and baking at 3 AM."

"It must be nice to be retired," Bitsie joked.

"If only it were that simple," said Stan. "If I'm so retired, then why am I spending my evenings knee-deep in a murder investigation?"

Bitsie laughed, but she wasn't feeling very amused.

It must all be connected: the fake doctor and his probably-bogus diagnosis, Marco's "accidental" death, even the oddly-placed raspberry ripple cupcake. They were all related, but how?

Another missing piece in the puzzle was still at the clinic, Bitsie decided. She needed to go back to the clinic after hours. She'd go back tomorrow evening, she decided, but she didn't want to go alone.

Bitsie considered asking Stan or Liz to go with her, but then remembered that the next day was their anniversary. It was ironic. Tomorrow was also the day her divorce was set to finalize. Her big brother would spend the day celebrating thirty-five years of happiness with his high-school sweet-heart, while she would spend the day wondering why she'd been such a fool—

But she shouldn't dwell on that, Bitsie admonished herself. She should just get through today and worry about tomorrow when it came. The divorce would soon be over and done with, and she could move on with her life. In fact, she realized, she already was.

Bitsie returned her thoughts to the original problem. Who could she ask to go with her to stake out the medical clinic?

With Hector back at work, Bitsie luxuriated in sleeping 'til the decadent hour of seven and lazing around in the bath 'til nearly eight. She tried not to think about the fact that sometime today she was going to

be officially single again after twenty-seven years of marriage. She didn't particularly want to be single again, but the prospect was no longer as horrible as it had once seemed.

Her phone rang just as she was getting out of the tub. It was Stan.

"Hey, Sis. Are you up to playing dogcatcher for me? Me and Liz are on the road to Eureka Springs, and we won't be back 'til tomorrow afternoon."

"Dogcatcher?"

"You remember Bill?"

"Yeah, has he shown up?"

"Not exactly. But he did call me at home late last night. Wouldn't say where he was. Said he was calling from a payphone, but where that payphone is, that's anybody's guess."

"What did he want?"

"He'd like for us to locate his dog."

"What kind of dog is it?"

"Male. Mixed breed Yellow Lab and German Shepherd."

"Anything else?"

"Missing one ear and blind in one eye. The blind eye is all clouded over, kind of like a cataract."

"Does this dog have a name?" Bitsie asked.

"Yes. He was last seen wearing a blue collar and answers to 'Kipper'."

"At least he sounds easy to identify."

"I don't know what's going on with Bill," said Stan, "but I've never known him to go anywhere without that dog. Bill loves that mutt like it's his little kid. He'd have had to have been pretty scared to leave in such a hurry that he'd leave Kipper behind. That convinces me that he saw or heard something he wasn't supposed to."

"You think he really was in the alley the night that Marco died?"

"Yes, but we won't know what he saw or heard unless he feels safe enough to talk, and right now, he doesn't even feel safe enough to tell me where he is."

"And what if I do find Kipper?"

"You'll have to keep Kipper with you 'til we get back, I guess," said Stan. "Bill says he'll call back after the weekend to see if we found him."

Everyone Bitsie talked to seemed to know Bill, but no one she questioned could say for certain that they'd seen Kipper since Monday, the evening before Marco was murdered, which was also the last time anyone remembered seeing Bill.

Bitsie made the rounds of every business downtown—she even hung out in front of Little Creek's only grocery store and asked everyone who came and went if they'd seen a dog matching Kipper's description, but her hours of searching resulted in no Kipper and no otherwise-useful information except a confirmation of what she already knew: Bill and Kipper had disappeared, and no one knew where either had gone.

There was no animal shelter in Little Creek. Impounded animals were taken to a shelter in Fayetteville. Bitsie called the shelter. No dog matching Kipper's description had been brought in.

The only thing she hadn't tried was making flyers and posting them around town, so when she got to work she went straight to the tiny office in the back and set to work making a flyer.

Jack stuck his head around the door and asked what she was doing.

"We're trying to find Bill's dog."

"Does that mean Bill has finally turned up?"

"No, he called Stan from a payphone, but refused to say where he was," Bitsie answered, "Do you know if he had any family in the area?"

"No, but he'd bring up having a sister in Dallas every once in a while."

"Did he ever go and see her?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you know what her name was?"

"Gwen, I think."

"And Bill's last name was—"

"Hotchburger."

"Hotchburger?"

"Pretty unusual, name, eh?" said Jack.

"Yes. And that could be our lucky break."

"You want to go get something to eat later this evening, when I get off?" Jack asked.

Bitsie hesitated.

"I just thought," Jack said, "Well, Liz said something about this being the day that your divorce was final and it being their anniversary and all—I didn't think it would be a very good evening for you to be alone."

"So, Liz assigned you the duty of being sure I didn't eat supper by myself," Bitsie said.

"If that's how you want to put it—" said Jack, smiling, "then sure. Liz put me up to it."

"I have one condition," said Bitsie. "I want to stop off at the Charter Health Clinic on the way back from the restaurant."

"Won't they be closed, by that time?"

"That's what I'm counting on. I don't want to go inside. I just want to sit in the parking lot."

"Sure," said Jack. "But I expect a complete explanation as to why you're so eager to sit in a car alone with me in the middle of a darkened parking lot."

He really was incorrigible, Bitsie decided. He seemed to enjoy nothing more than making her uncomfortable.

Chapter Eight

Bitsie had arranged to meet Jack at the bakery at 7:45, but it was almost eight when she finally arrived. She'd spent way too much time deciding what to wear—there'd been several wardrobe changes involved and, in the end, she'd taken off the casual sundress and put on jeans and her least flattering t-shirt and removed half of the carefully-applied makeup she'd spent forty-five minutes putting on.

"Sorry, Jack," said Bitsie. "Something came up—"

"That's alright. Shall we go eat first or are we doing the cop thing with takeout sandwiches and coffee in a thermos?"

"Eat first, I think," said Bitsie.

It was after nine when they pulled into the parking lot of the clinic. Jack was driving. They'd left Bitsie's car at the bakery. Jack parked under the shadow of a couple of trees at the edge of the parking lot and as far away from the lights illuminating the entrance to the building as he could get.

"What exactly are you expecting to see here?" Jack asked. "Who'd be here at this hour?"

"Just wait," said Bitsie. "You'll see. Or not. I could be wrong."

"You could be wrong? I'm sure you are never wrong." Jack laughed.

Bitsie loved Jack's laugh, but she wished he stop laughing. She wished he'd stop smiling at her like that and looking at her with those big green eyes of his.

"Look!" Bitsie hissed.

Jack looked.

Pulling up to the front entrance was a long, white, windowless van with Speedy's Cleaning Service emblazoned in big red letters on the side.

Two women got out, one from the passenger side and one from the driver's seat. The driver went to the front door and entered some numbers on the keypad beside the entrance, while the passenger unloaded a vacuum cleaner from the back of the van. The driver pulled open the front door, waited for her partner to struggle in with the vacuum and then both women disappeared inside.

"Is that what you expected to see?" Jack asked.

"Not exactly," said Bitsie, "but it's a good start."

"What do you want to do now?"

"We can go," said Bitsie, "but first I want to get that phone number off the side of the van."

As Bitsie was eating breakfast next morning, her phone rang.

"You the lady looking for the dog?"

"Yes!"

"I think I got him."

Kipper, it seemed, had turned up at a farm a couple of miles outside of Little Creek. He was thin and thirsty and covered in mud, but otherwise no worse for the wear.

Bitsie drove out and collected him before she called Stan, who agreed to come get Kipper as soon as he and Liz got home from Eureka Springs. Bitsie wouldn't have minded keeping Kipper at her house, but she lacked a secure fence and keeping him indoors was out of the question. Max, like most cats, was staunchly anti-canine.

After Bitsie had stopped by the grocery store to get dogfood and tied Kipper up in the backyard in the shade of a tree with a big bowl of food and water, she sat down and scratched behind his one and a half ears while she dialed the number she'd taken off the side of the Speedy's Cleaning Service van.

"Speedy's Cleaning Service," a woman's voice answered. "How can I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Speedy," said Bitsie. It was a silly way to start, but she hadn't come up with anything better.

"Uhm, there's really no Speedy. It's just a name."

"Can I speak to the owner, then?"

"Ahh, you want to speak to Pete."

Pete picked up a few seconds later.

"Do you do restaurant cleaning?" asked Bitsie.

"Sure," Pete answered. "We'll clean anything. Be happy to come out and take a look at your premises and give you an estimate."

"Would you?"

"Sure. I'll be leaving early today since it's Saturday, but I could come over first thing on Monday."

"I'm all the way over in Little Creek," said Bitsie.

There was a short pause, "No, sure. We can do Little Creek. I have a crew over there every Tuesday and Friday."

"Great. It's Bitsie's Bakeshop. 4th and Lyle. When should I expect you?"

There was a much longer pause.

"Bitsie's Bakeshop," Bitsie repeated.

There was another pause.

"Uhm—we don't really do bakeries," said Pete hastily and hung up.

"Doesn't do bakeries, my sweet pickled plums," Bitsie mumbled under her breath. But at least she knew what to do next. It was time for her to meet this Pete in person, and she knew this time who had to go with her.

Bitsie smiled to herself as she dialed Raina's number.

Midmorning on Monday, Bitsie and Raina, trailed by Stan and Liz in another vehicle, in case things went really wrong, pulled into a curbside parking space a block from the only address she'd found for Speedy's Cleaning Service. Bitsie walked back to Stan's truck.

"If we're not back in ten minutes, you know what to do," she said.

Stan nodded grimly.

"Here, Raina," Bitsie said, handing her a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses, "Put these on."

Speedy's Cleaning Service shared its premises with a car detailing shop, and, when they first entered, it was hard to tell where to go.

"I'm looking for Pete," Bitsie said to a pair of legs sticking out of the back seat of a luxury sedan.

The pair of legs emerged from the back seat, followed by the body of a young man with a scar down one cheek and a pair of bright blue eyes.

"Pete's in the back," he said, gesturing down a hallway at the back of the garage. "Knock on the red door."

"Come in," said a man's voice, in response to Bitsie's sharp knock.

"You ready?" she whispered to Raina, who gave her a nervous nod.

"Remember, when you've seen all you need, start coughing," Bitsie whispered and pushed open the door.

Pete came around his cluttered desk, all smiles, his hand out to greet them.

She'd seen this man somewhere before, Bitsie realized with a jolt, but where? He was tall and muscular with dark hair and nondescript features. His one distinguishing characteristic, aside from his physique, was a tiny mustache. Mustache!

Bitsie had just figured out where she'd seen Pete when Raina started coughing.

"I'm sorry," said Bitsie, "My friend seems to—is there a water fountain in here?"

"Out in the garage. I'll take you."

"Oh, that OK," Bitsie protested hastily. "No need. I just remembered seeing it on the way in."

Back at the car, Raina was in no mood to stick around long enough for Bitsie to go back and fill in Stan and Liz on what had happened.

"Just go," she insisted, swigging from a bottle of water. Her fake coughing fit had triggered real one.

Bitsie pulled away from the curb and Stan followed.

"That was him," said Raina and they turned onto the highway back toward Little Creek. "That was the man who was pretending to be Dr. Montgomery."

By now, Pete would be wondering why they hadn't returned after Raina's coughing fit. Hopefully, he hadn't recognized Raina. Bitsie had taken the precaution of telling the young man out in the garage to apologize to Pete for them. She told him that her friend was very sick, and she'd have to come back later. Hopefully, the ruse had worked.

In any case, Bitsie now had a lot more to go on than before. Not only had she successfully located the man who had been impersonating Dr. Montgomery, she also knew that Pete was connected to Jennifer. But what was their relationship?

Stan accompanied Raina to the police station, where she told them about Pete impersonating Dr. Montgomery.

The next morning, an officer assigned to the investigation into Marco's death made a visit to Speedy's Cleaning Service to question Pete.

Pete, it turned out, was more than willing to talk. He immediately admitted to being Jennifer's younger brother, and what he had to say about what Jennifer had been up to was extremely enlightening.

Pete confessed to impersonating Dr. Montgomery. His sister had put him up to it, he said. She'd given him a sob story about how terrible Marco had been to her and how this was a perfect way of getting back at him.

He'd known it was wrong, Pete said, right from the start, but Jennifer had convinced him that sneaking into the clinic on a few Sundays and pretending to be a doctor was nothing more than a rather cruel practical joke. Pete wished he hadn't done it, he said, especially now that the man he'd fooled was dead. Pete claimed that he didn't know anything about how Marco had died, other than having heard from his sister that it was an on-the-job accident.

"Did the officer who interviewed Pete believe that he was telling the truth?" Bitsie asked Stan.

"He seemed to."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I'm inclined to, but occasionally my instincts steer me wrong."

"What do you think about trying to find Bill? Jack said that Bill has a sister in Dallas. How hard do you think it would be to find her?"

"We won't know until we try," said Stan.

Later in the afternoon, when Bitsie was sure that Raina had had time to recover from her grilling at the police station, Bitsie dialed Raina's number. She had a little grilling of her own to do.

Raina agreed to meet Bitsie for a few minutes at the same park they'd met the first time.

"What is it that you wanted to ask me?"

"Somebody must know the truth about what was going on between Marco and Jennifer in the weeks before he died," said Bitsie. "I'm thinking you might have some ideas about who that person could be."

"Marco was very close to his Mom," said Raina, "but he always kept stuff from her, so she wouldn't worry, and his Dad has been gone for years."

"Is there anyone else he might have confided in," Bitsie pressed, "if there was something serious worrying him?"

"I don't know," said Raina. "When we were married, that person was me."

"Did Marco have any siblings?"

"There were nine brothers and sisters, but most of them don't live around here."

"Was he particularly close to any of them?"

"Daisy," said Raina. "His sister Daisy moved up here around the time we divorced, and I think they were pretty close as kids, so he might have told her stuff he wouldn't have told anyone else."

"How can I find her?"

"I have her number," said Raina. "Sometimes she'd come and pick up the kids when it was Marco's weekend to keep them."

That evening, after leaving the bakery, Bitsie hurried home and fired up her computer. What she really wanted was a long hot bath, and Max was agitating for his dinner, but both of them were going to have to wait. Before she did anything else, Bitsie was determined to track down at least a few scraps of information which might lead them to Bill's sister, and, hopefully, Bill himself. Talking to Marco's sister Daisy could wait until later.

Bill had promised Stan that he'd call back after the weekend, but it was now Monday evening and there'd been no word. It was time to take more aggressive measures.

Bitsie remembered Jack saying that he thought Bill had a sister name Gwen. Bill's last name was Hotchburger. Possibly, Gwen might have gone through a name change or two by this time, but there was still a chance of finding her.

It took some doing, but forty-five minutes later Bitsie had managed to find a list of recent addresses and one phone number for a Gwen Hotchburger in Dallas Texas. It might not be a current number, but it was worth a try.

Bitsie dialed.

A woman's voice answered.

"I'm looking for Gwen Hotchburger."

"This is she," said the woman on the other end.

"My name is Bitsie George. My brother is a friend of your brother's."

There was a short pause before Gwen spoke.

"What can I do for you?" she said at last.

"I was wondering if I might be able to speak to Bill."

"Bill doesn't live here."

Bingo! She'd managed to track down the right Gwen Hotchburger.

"Do you know where I might reach him?"

"I'm sorry, I can't help you."

"That's too bad," said Bitsie, "because I was calling to tell Bill that we've found his dog."

There was a short silence on the other end, then a period of muffled conversation, as if Gwen had placed her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone while talking to someone else.

The phone changed hands and a man's voice said, "Hello."

"Am I speaking to Bill?"

"Is Kipper OK?"

"Yes. Kipper is doing just fine. He was really hungry. He'll need fattening up a bit, but otherwise—"

"I was worried they would get him. They said they'd kill him if I—"

"If you what—"

Bill didn't say a word.

"Who would get him? Who said they would kill Kipper?"

Bill remained silent on the other end of the line.

"Was it Monty? Did Monty threaten you?"

"I can't talk about it."

"That's fine," said Bitsie. Clearly, pressure tactics weren't going to work. "Stan and Liz have Kipper. He's perfectly safe. What would you like for them to do with him?"

"I'll come and get him," said Bill. "When I can. Tell Stan they said that. Tell Stan they plan to kill Kipper." Bill's voice was rising, and he sounded perilously near tears. "Tell Stan not to let Kipper out of his sight."

Poor Bill. No wonder he wouldn't talk. Someone had threatened to kill his best friend if he told what he knew, and Bitsie was betting that Bill knew plenty.

Chapter Nine

The very next day, while Bitsie was helping Jack open, she got a text from Stan.

They took Jennifer in for questioning, it read.

Three hours later, when the morning rush was over, Bitsie retreated to the alley and called Stan back to see what he knew.

"She was hardly a font of information," said Stan. "She finally admitted to being at the bakery shortly before Marco died, but she claims that when she left he was still alive. She says that Marco called her and asked her to come because his van wouldn't start."

"An odd choice. Why would Marco call his Ex out in the wee hours of the morning to do him a favor? And even if he had, why would she have agreed to come?"

"That's what I thought, too. It's a very fishy story. According to Jennifer, she arrived only a few minutes after Danny says that he left the bakery. It would have made much more sense for Marco to have called Danny to come back and give him a jump."

"Is that what Jennifer is claiming? That she came back to jump his van?"

"Sort of. She claims that when she got there, there was nothing at all wrong with his van and that it was all just a pretext on Marco's part. According to her, Marco wanted to make up and get back together with her."

"At two in the morning, on the jobsite, at the end of a long day of work, Marco calls up his ex and asks her to get out of bed and drive all the way over to the bakery for a relationship-status discussion? That's what's she's saying?"

"Yep. But it gets even weirder. She claims to have seen Monty on her way out. She says that she left only because Marco told her to. She says that Monty came in the back door, totally unexpected, and started yelling at Marco."

"Yelling?" Bitsie asked. "What exactly was he yelling?"

"Generally obscene threats and insults, I gather," said Stan. "That part of her story is the only part which rings remotely true."

"I'm not so sure," said Bitsie. "I suspect that Monty was there, but Marco never even knew that he was in the building."

"What makes you think that?"

Bitsie declined to answer. She had her suspicions, but she couldn't back them up, so she wasn't ready to voice them aloud.

"I think," said Bitsie, "that Jennifer had better be sleeping with her eyes open."

"You think Jennifer is in danger?" Stan asked. "I thought she was your prime suspect?"

"Can't she be both things at once?" Bitsie retorted, and Stan didn't press her for any further explanation.

As of the present, the police were narrowing in on Monty as a prime suspect but having a suspect didn't help much since he seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

Bitsie decided she could no longer put off talking to Marco's sister, Daisy. It had been nine days since Marco's death, and, although there was a general consensus that Marco's death was suspicious, there were too many pieces missing from the puzzle for Bitsie to be able to rest easy and wait for the police to come up with answers on their own.

Bitsie called the number Raina had given her but got no answer. She left a message explaining who she was, but not what she wanted.

An hour later Daisy called Bitsie back.

"Raina said you'd probably be calling," said Daisy.

"I'm really sorry for your loss," said Bitsie.

"Me too," said Daisy flatly. There was a long pause before she spoke again. "Look, I've been trying to decide if I should go to the police or not. There was some weird stuff going on with my brother's fiancée right before he died."

"What kind of weird stuff?"

"I'd rather not have this conversation over the phone," said Daisy.

Bitsie was afraid Daisy was going to hang up on her, but she didn't. Instead Daisy proposed that they meet at the pocket park near Raina's daycare, and, twenty minutes later, Bitsie was sitting on a bench beside Daisy, who appeared remarkably composed, under the circumstances.

"It's about the life insurance policy my brother got," Daisy said. "That's what's bothering me."

"You mean the one Marco had taken out for his kids?"

"No, he still had that one when he died. There was another one that he took out when he and Jennifer got engaged."

"Marco took out an insurance policy for Jennifer."

"Yeah. I guess it was a really big one, too," Daisy looked around uncomfortably and lowered her voice. "You know I'd be suspicious that she had something to do with his death, except for one thing."

"What is that one thing?"

"By the time Marco died, he'd already canceled the policy."

"Do you know exactly when Jennifer and Marco broke up?"

"Not exactly. He told me they'd broken up a little less than a week before he died. He works a lot, though, so sometimes I can go a whole week without talking to him. Still, it couldn't have been more than two weeks that they'd been broken up when he told me about it."

"Do you know why they broke up?"

"Yeah, I mean I know what he said, although it's hard to believe that what he was accusing her of is true."

"What was he accusing her of?"

"He said that she'd tricked him into believing that he had a brain tumor."

"It may be hard to believe," said Bitsie, "but I'm pretty sure that it is true. A couple of days ago Jennifer's brother admitted to posing a doctor and giving Marco a false diagnosis."

"That's what Raina already told me, but—I still can't quite believe it. What kind of person would do something so cruel?"

"It appears to be what Jennifer did."

"Right before they broke up, I guess Marco got suspicious, and went to another doctor and found out he didn't even have a tumor. That made him really mad, and he doesn't get mad easily. Jennifer claimed not to know anything about any of it, but Marco didn't believe her. I wondered, at the time, if he might not have gone a little crazy and imagined the whole thing, but he's never been the paranoid type. If anything, he's too trusting. But after he died like that, I started to wonder if Jennifer hadn't had something to do with the accident."

"What do you know about the life insurance policy?"

"The same day he and Jennifer broke up, Marco went straight down to see his insurance agent and canceled the policy. At least that's what he told me."

"Do you know if Jennifer knew Marco planned to cancel the policy?"

"I don't think they talked about it, but you'd think she'd assume that's what he'd do, sooner or later, seeing as they had broken up."

"But how did he get the policy issued in the first place? Insurance agents aren't terribly keen on issuing life insurance policies for clients diagnosed with a terminal illness," Bitsie said.

"I don't know, but probably Jennifer put him up to not disclosing his tumor."

"True. Since it wasn't a real doctor who diagnosed the tumor in the first place, there wouldn't have been any record of it. Jennifer's brother Pete was using the office of a doctor who'd hired his company to clean for them," Bitsie explained. "He'd go in on Sunday when nobody else was around. I'm guessing that he could have stolen images of scans of someone with a real tumor to show Marco. Raina said she was shown scans when she went with him, but I wonder how he tricked Marco into believing he'd actually had an MRI."

"Maybe Pete's company also cleaned a facility with an MRI machine?"

"Maybe," said Bitsie, "but don't you think that would be hard to pull off?"

"My brother was a very trusting guy," said Daisy. "I think Jennifer could be a professional scam artist. I think she might have married her first two husbands because she knew they were about to die."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, think about it. When she and Marco first got together, she told me all about how sad it was being a widow. Both her first two marriages ended in less than a year, she said. At the time, I felt really sorry for her, but now I wonder if it wasn't all just crocodile tears."

"It does seem suspicious," Bitsie agreed. "But if it's true that Jennifer had been targeting men who'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness, then why did she hone in on Marco, who was perfectly healthy?"

"That I don't understand," said Daisy.

And they might never know, thought Bitsie. Still, she had garnered some useful information. Marco had evidently had a life insurance policy taken out for Jennifer, but the million-dollar question was whether or not Jennifer had known that Marco had already canceled it before the night he died.

The mystery of Monty's disappearance resolved itself three days later when he was arrested while attempting to hold up a convenience store three towns away. The charges against him were sufficient to hold him. Little Creek police department sent an officer over to question him.

According to Stan, it was the investigating officer's belief that Monty was lying through his teeth about his activities the night that Marco died.

"Monty claims that he did go to the bakery to confront Marco," Stan told Bitsie. "He says that he went there because Marco owed him unpaid wages."

"What did Monty have to say about Jennifer's whereabouts?" asked Bitsie.

"Monty agrees with Jennifer on the time frame of her coming and going—"

"Which matches up with what was caught on the ATM surveillance camera?"

"Yes, more or less. So, there's nothing new there, but the main bit of information—if you can call it that—is that Monty is claiming that Marco was already dead when he arrived at the bakery."

"So, he's claiming to have nothing to do with it?"

"Yes."

"And how is he accounting for his absence these two weeks?"

"He isn't. He's refusing to say where he was, or what he was doing, or who he was with. My gut says he's spent the last thirteen days holed up somewhere in a cheap hotel waiting to see how the chips would fall."

"So basically, questioning Monty yielded nothing."

"Oh, I wouldn't say nothing," said Stan. "Monty is claiming that Jennifer confessed to killing Marco."

"Just like that? She confessed?"

"That's more or less what Monty is claiming to have happened. He says he came in and found Jennifer standing over Marco's body, and she just looked at him and said something like, 'I killed him.'"

"I'm not inclined to believe a word Monty says," Bitsie muttered, then she said much more loudly, "Has anyone seen Jennifer since they brought her in for questioning? That was three days ago."

"Not that I know of," said Stan. "They tried to get her back down to the station to answer some more questions, but she's not answering her phone and the officer who went to her house got no response at the front door."

"I have a very bad feeling about this," said Bitsie.

"About what? About Monty? I think it's a very positive development that they've got him locked up," said Stan.

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

Bitsie ignored her brother's question.

"We close early tomorrow," said Bitsie, "since it's Saturday. How would you feel about doing a little fishing?"

"Fishing? Since when did you take up fishing?"

"Since about three minutes ago."

"You know something I don't?"

"I don't **know** anything," said Bitsie, "but let's just say I have very strong suspicions."

"We don't have any bait," Liz pointed out, as they loaded a couple of old rods of Stan's into the back of his pickup.

"You don't need bait," Bitsie retorted, "if you don't really care to catch anything."

"I don't get it," said Liz.

"That's OK," said Bitsie. "We're not looking for fish."

"What are you looking for?" Liz asked.

"Something I really hope we don't find," said Bitsie.

Liz looked over at Stan. Stan just shrugged.

"Sometimes," said Liz, looking back at Stan, "I wonder about the sanity of your sister."

"I've always wondered that," Stan retorted, "But this time, I think she may be onto something."

They arrived at Brink's Lake to find that they were not the only ones who'd had the idea of spending their Saturday afternoon fishing.

Bitsie jumped out and started hauling the poles and a couple of folding stools from the back.

"Everybody carry something," she said in a low voice. "The plan is that we walk all the way around the lake without making it obvious that we are searching for a body."

"I didn't know we were searching for a body," said Liz.

"I think you'd better explain whose body we're looking for," said Stan.

"Why do you need to know that?" Bitsie demanded. She immediately regretted it. What was it about being a little sister that made a person defensive long after an age-difference of a couple of years should mean nothing.

"What I mean is," Bitsie continued, moderating her tone, "that a dead body is a dead body, and no matter whose dead body it is, I expect we'd still be interested in it."

"Might you have any idea what this hypothetical dead body might be wearing?"

"Something bright," said Bitsie. She thought for a moment and added, "and possibly hoop earrings."

They made it all the way to the opposite side of the lake before they found anything. It was far from where the rest of the fishermen were, and the well-beaten path had dwindled to a hard-to-distinguish track through waist-high weeds and the occasional bramble. It was hot and muggy and by the time they'd gone 20 yards they were covered with mosquito bites.

Stan was the one who found Jennifer.

She was lying in a stand of cattails. She'd definitely been dead for a while. When Stan called them over, Liz turned away before she got within ten feet of the body. Bitsie stopped short beside Liz. It was obvious, even at that distance, that Jennifer's death had not been a peaceful one.

"How did you know we'd find her here?" Stan asked. "How did you even know she was dead?"

"I didn't **know**," Bitsie insisted. "It was just a suspicion."

"Care to share the basis of that suspicion?" Stan said. "I expect my buddies down at the police station are going to have lots of questions for you. Telling them you dragged us out here to **not** go fishing and just happened to stumble on a dead body isn't going to cut it with them."

"You know who likes to go fishing here?" said Bitsie.

"How would I know that?" Stan replied. He was getting a bit hot under the collar and it wasn't just because the humidity was hovering at eighty percent and the ambient temperature was closing in on ninety degrees.

"I had a chat with Monty's Ex," said Bitsie, "back when this whole mess started."

Bitsie stole another look at Jennifer's body and wished that she hadn't.

"And?" said Stan, a bit impatiently.

"She mentioned something about how Monty liked to take their kids out to Brinks Lake."

"So?" asked Liz. She was looking a bit green around the gills and was shielding her face with the turned-up collar of her blouse.

"When Jennifer disappeared after accusing Monty of murder, I thought, well—"

"That Monty might have killed her." Stan finished Bitsie's sentence for her.

"Yes," Bitsie said. "Then I asked myself, if I were Monty and I'd killed somebody, where would be the first place I'd think of to get rid of the body?"

"Your favorite fishing hole?"

"Bingo!"

"When you two are done messing around with corpses," said Liz, making a beeline for what there was of the trail out, "I'll be waiting for you in the car."

"I'm calling this in," said Stan, raising his phone to his ear.

Chapter Ten

It was time to try again to get Bill to talk, preferably in person, Bitsie decided.

Monty was safely behind bars. The police were holding him without bail, seeing as he was now the prime suspect in not one but two murders, not to mention an armed robbery. Jennifer was no longer a danger to anyone, not even to herself. Now, perhaps, Bill would feel safe enough to tell everything he knew.

In the end, it was Stan who convinced Bill to come back. Stan called Gwen—using the number that Bitsie had given him—and Gwen convinced Bill to talk to Stan. After that, it was only a matter of Gwen buying Bill a bus ticket from Dallas.

Less than 24 hours after Jennifer's body was found, Stan was on his way to pick Bill up from the Fayetteville bus station. Bitsie rode to the station with Stan, accompanied by Kipper in the back seat.

"Looking forward to seeing your favorite human?" Bitsie craned her neck around to address Kipper, who sat upright on the seat with his nose pressed expectantly against the window glass. He wriggled in response to her enquiry, although he could hardly be expected to know that he was about to be reunited with his master.

"So, Bill really refused to tell you anything on the phone?" said Bitsie.

"Bill doesn't trust phones," Stan replied.

"Aliens have 'em tapped?"

"Something like that," said Stan. "I expect Bill will tell us everything he knows in his own good time."

Bitsie nodded.

"But," Stan continued, "before he does, I'd like to hear your version of what you think happened. You know, just to prevent one of those I-told-you-so moments that featured so consistently in our childhood. You really do take sibling rivalry seriously."

"Sibling rivalry?" Bitsie protested. "What rivalry? I refuse to admit to any rivalry."

"You do, do you? Alright, then. In that case, I'm sure you won't mind telling me exactly what you believe happened the night Marco died."

"Shall I?" Bitsie teased. "But there isn't time. We're almost at the bus station."

"We're early," said Stan, as he pulled into an empty parking space. "The bus isn't getting in for another ten minutes."

"Alright," said Bitsie. "I'll tell you what I think happened, although there are a couple of little things niggling at me that I still don't have figured out."

"Go ahead, Sis. Wow me!" Stan turned off the ignition, removed his keys, folded his arms across his chest and gave Bitsie his full attention.

"I think both Jennifer and Monty had a motive for murdering Marco," said Bitsie, then paused for dramatic effect.

"Yes, well, so do I," said Stan, "But which of them actually did it and how?"

"They both did," said Bitsie. "They planned it together."

"But they didn't even know each other. I mean, that surveillance camera at the ATM put them both in the vicinity of the bakery at the same time, but—"

"No. They didn't know each other very long before they conspired to murder Marco, but it doesn't take long does it?" said Bitsie.

"Doesn't take long for what?"

"For two people to bond over a common enemy."

"Enemy? Marco had just fired Monty. But what did Monty have to gain by Marco's death?" Stan asked.

"I think it was money," said Bitsie.

"Money? You think that Monty killed Marco over a few day's-worth of disputed wages? Besides, how was he expecting to collect money from a dead man?"

"It wasn't the wages he wanted," Bitsie said. "It wasn't about the paycheck. I doubt Marco even owed Monty any money at all. I think Jennifer talked Monty into doing her dirty work in return for a cut of the life-insurance money."

"But I thought that Marco cancelled the policy as soon as they broke up. There wouldn't have been any life insurance money coming to Jennifer."

"Yes, Marco did cancel it, but Jennifer didn't know that he had done it already."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"I can't be completely sure but think about it: Marco has an enormous insurance policy taken out to benefit his fiancée in the case of his untimely (or, in this case, anticipated) death. Then Marco breaks up with Jennifer because he finds out she's been playing a cruel trick on him. He's understandably furious with her about being tricked into believing he's a dying man. Jennifer is only too aware that it's only a matter of time before he cancels the life-insurance policy or turns her and her brother in for fraud, or both."

"OK. But why was Jennifer trying to make Marco think he was dying, in the first place? I know you told me that you suspected that she had married her first two husbands because she knew they were dying, but even if that is true, why would she target a healthy man?"

"I suspect it is very hard work finding rich single men with terminal illnesses whose near-and-dear don't put up a fuss when they want to get married in a hurry to a woman they've only just met."

"I'm sure that's true. How do you know her first two husbands were rich?" Stan asked.

"I'm assuming."

"That's probably a safe assumption."

"I think Jennifer intended to kill Marco from the very beginning," said Bitsie. "She just hadn't figured out exactly when and how she was going to do it."

"But if her only goal was to kill him, why go through the trouble to trick him into believing he was dying?"

"Because Marco wasn't rich, so he had to be motivated to take out a huge life insurance policy and to do it right away."

"That's plausible."

"Who knows exactly how Jennifer talked him into getting the policy in the first place, but Marco should have known what he was doing would have been insurance fraud, had he actually been ill. She'd always planned on killing him and making his death look like an accident. Otherwise, what would have been the point; she couldn't have collected. But when Marco unexpectedly broke up with her, she got desperate and started looking around for a way to get the job done quickly."

"And she found Monty?"

"Yes. Monty was perfect for the job. He knew exactly what could realistically go wrong on a job-site, and he also already had a grudge against Marco for firing him."

"But how did they do it?" said Stan. "How did they set up the accident?"

"I think Jennifer knew where Marco was working that night. I think she showed up there unannounced and initiated an argument with him, or maybe it wasn't an argument. Maybe, she tried to convince him that she wanted to make up with him. Either way, the only thing she had to do was lure him out of the kitchen for a few minutes so that Monty could come in and figure out how to kill him."

"So, you think Monty did all the tampering with the circuit panel."

"Yes. He also loosened the fitting on the drain pipe under the sink, so it would leak," Bitsie answered.

"But wasn't he taking a risk?" Stan asked. "Running water in the sink like that. Mightn't Marco have heard the sound of water running from wherever Jennifer had taken him and have come to investigate?"

"Monty didn't have to run any water. There were pans soaking in the sink. He just loosened the coupling on the drain-pipe, and the water started to slowly drain out onto the floor."

"Go on."

"So, while Jennifer was distracting Marco, Monty drained the sink to create the puddle on the floor. He hid the mop. He must have done something with the towels, carried them away with him and chucked them in another dumpster in the next alley or something, because they've never turned up. The last thing he did was go and turn the circuit breaker for the outlet back on."

"Then what?"

"When Jennifer arrived, Marco must have been in the middle of replacing that outlet next to the sink, because the old outlet had been removed and there was just a bunch of naked wires sticking out of the box."

"How could Monty have known ahead of time that Marco would be working next to the sink like that?"

"He couldn't have known," said Bitsie, "It was partially a crime of opportunity. They really had nothing to lose. If Monty hadn't figured out a way of staging it to look like an accident, then he could have quietly slipped back out and no one would have been the wiser."

"Except Jennifer."

"Yes. Except Jennifer. But that wasn't much of a risk. I imagine she was a bit scared of Monty."

"As well she should have been, seeing as it looks pretty likely that he killed her. But why did Monty decide to kill Jennifer, too?"

"He didn't have to kill her, there was really nothing for him to gain by it, but he must have hated her for trying to throw him under the bus by accusing him of single-handedly committing a murder that was her idea in the first place."

"Wait a minute, why would Monty give in to his temper, if it meant losing his cut of the life-insurance money?"

"By the time Monty killed Jennifer, he'd have already figured out that there wasn't going to be any life-insurance money coming to anyone. It was a homicide investigation, at that point. I expect he realized that the insurance company would fight tooth and nail to resist paying out."

"Back to the bakery," said Stan. "It would have been a nearly fool-proof plan if it hadn't been for that cupcake Marco had in his hand. The police wouldn't have looked into the matter any further if there hadn't been so many people squawking about it."

"That cupcake was the one thing that got us all to thinking twice about what could have easily passed for a tragic accident," said Bitsie.

"What I still don't understand," said Stan, "is who put the raspberry ripple cupcake into Marco's hand."

"I think it was Bill."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Remember when Jack said he last saw Bill?"

"Yes. Jack saw Bill in the alley when he was leaving the bakery the evening before Marco was killed."

"And what was the last thing Jack did before he left? Do you remember?"

"No," said Stan.

"Think harder."

"The plate of cupcakes!" said Stan, hitting himself on the forehead with the flat of his hand. "Of course, Bill couldn't have missed hearing Marco going on about how much he hated raspberries."

"Yes. And do you remember me telling you about all those cupcakes in the display case each with only one bite taken out of them?"

"Yes, but I don't see what that has to do—"

"Suppose that you were a terrified man looking desperately a particular flavor of cupcake in a completely darkened room."

"I guess you'd just have to taste them until you found the one you were looking for."

"Exactly," said Bitsie.

"So, you think Bill placed a half-eaten raspberry ripple cupcake in the dead man's hand in the hopes that someone would figure out that it wasn't all just a tragic accident."

"Yes."

"But aren't those display cases lit up from the inside. Even when the main overhead lights are turned off."

"Yes," said Bitsie, "They are, but I think that Bill was the one who pulled the main breaker immediately after returning to the bakery."

"Returning?"

"Yes, because if Bill was going to put a half-eaten cupcake in a recently-murdered man's hand and the two people responsible for killing that man had threatened Bill with a similar fate if he didn't quietly disappear—"

"So, you think he came back again after Monty and Jennifer left the scene."

"Yes. I think he hid somewhere and watched both Monty and Jennifer leave. Then he went back into the building. The door to the alley must have locked behind Jennifer. She was the last person to leave. Bill had to break the window pane in the storage room window and reach through to unlatch it. Then he climbed into the storage closet which would have meant going right past the breaker box to even get to the kitchen—"

"Where he knew there was a dead man lying in a puddle of water next to a bunch of potentially live wires."

"Yes. I think the lights were already all turned out when he returned. He could have identified the main breaker by touch but finding the right breaker for the outlet circuit without light would have been almost impossible."

"So, the lights were out already, but, because he was scared of getting electrocuted himself, Bill pulled the main breaker as a precaution before even going back into the kitchen."

"I think he was probably too scared to have turned on any lights, anyway. He didn't want to risk anyone knowing he'd come back."

"So, because what little light comes in through the windows from the street wasn't enough to tell one cupcake from another, he was forced to sample quite a few cupcakes out of the case before he found the one he was looking for."

"Yes, he was very methodical about it. He took a bite out of one from each row until he found the flavor he was looking for."

"But what about the busted-up cash register?" said Stan.

They were interrupted by the frantic barking and ecstatic whimpering of Kipper. They looked up to see the source of his excitement. The bus from Dallas had arrived and Bill was coming across the parking lot towards their car.

"I guess we are about to find out if your theories prove correct," said Stan.

Bill insisted on talking to Stan alone before he went to the police station. They pulled off the side of the road at a small picnic spot. Bitsie stayed in the car while Bill and Stan sat on a picnic table and Kipper cavorted around them in celebration of his beloved owner's return.

It didn't take long for Bill to tell his story. Ten minutes later, Bill and Stan were back in the car and they were on their way to the police station.

When they arrived at the station, Bill and Stan went inside. Bitsie put Kipper on his leash and took him for a walk around the block. It was slow going. Every few feet, Kipper would look back in the direction they'd come, sit down and whine. He was clearly anxious about being separated once again from Bill.

"Where to?" Stan asked Bill as they got back in the car. "You know you could just come home and stay with us for a while. You know we have that old travel trailer out back—You could have your own space."

"Kipper and I," said Bill, "will be going back down to Texas."

"To live with your sister?" Bitsie asked.

"Yeah, we'll give it a try, anyway."

"You know they'll be calling you to testify, at Monty's trial," said Stan. "I'm not exaggerating when I say you'll be the star witness for the prosecution."

"Yeah, I know."

Bill declined all additional offers of a place to stay and asked to be dropped off at his old spot behind the bakery.

"Are you sure he'll be safe back there," Bitsie asked anxiously, as she and Stan pulled away from the curb. "I mean, what if Monty gets one of his friends to—"

"I don't think Monty has many friends," said Stan wryly.

"You're sure he's not getting bail?" said Bitsie.

"Not likely," said Stan. "I understand they found blood in the trunk of his car. Of course, we won't know for absolutely sure until the results come back from the lab that it's Jennifer's, but unless there's a third victim out there unaccounted for, it must be."

"So, was I right or not?" Bitsie demanded.

"You were right," Stan answered. "You were right about virtually everything that happened that night at the bakery. The stuff about Jennifer? Well, she's dead now, so we'll probably know exactly what she was up to."

"But what about the cash register? Did Bill tell you anything about that?"

"Ah—" said Stan. He hesitated before continuing. "I'm not sure if I should tell you what I know about that."

"Why?"

"If you knew there were extenuating circumstances and the thief made full restitution, would you consider not pressing charges?"

"What extenuating circumstances?" demanded Bitsie. "Do you really know who did it?"

"Look in the glove compartment," said Stan.

Bitsie opened the glove compartment. Inside was a small mayonnaise jar filled with crumpled bills and loose change.

"What is this?"

"How much was taken from the register?" Stan asked.

"I think Jack said when he counted up what was left there was a hundred and twenty dollars missing."

"I'm pretty sure that if you count that up, you'll find there's exactly a hundred and twenty dollars in that mayonnaise jar."

"This money came from Bill, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"But why did he—"

"What would you do if your life had been threatened and the quickest and safest way out of town was a bus ticket, but you had no money to buy one?" asked Stan.

"So that's why only part of the money was taken," said Bitsie. "It's all making sense now."

"Yes," said Stan. "Bill took the money from the register when he came back to plant the raspberry ripple cupcake. He couldn't see much in the dark, but he knew that twenties were kept on the left, so he counted out seven of those—he figured that would be enough to get a ticket out of town—and left the rest of the cash in the register."

"Tell Bill I'll just think of it as a loan," said Bitsie, smiling.

Chapter Eleven

Bitsie stood at the plate-glass windows at the front of the bakery and looked out at the people going by on the sidewalk. At the moment, the tiny dining area in front of the bakery cases was empty, but a few hours earlier it had been standing-room only.

"What do you think about adding some little tables out front on the sidewalk?" she asked Jack, who stood behind the counter with a rag in his hand and a smile on his face. "Do you there's enough room?"

"I think that's a great idea," said Jack. "And now I have a question for you?"

Bitsie turned to look at Jack.

"I was wondering," said Jack, "If you aren't busy Friday night—"

If she didn't know better, Bitsie thought, if she were a different woman and Jack were a different man, she'd think he was working up to asking her out on a date. Did men even still ask women out on dates? Maybe that wasn't how dating worked, anymore.

"Well," Bitsie replied. "I don't really have any plans, unless you count ordering in a pizza and watching some truly mindless reality TV with Max."

"Max?" Jack asked. He looked slightly alarmed, although Bitsie couldn't work out why. Of course, he probably didn't know Max was a cat. It would be rather odd for her to be seeing someone so soon after her divorce.

"Max is my cat," Bitsie explained. "He's twenty pounds of pedigreed Persian and thinks he's a dog, but he makes a great viewing companion for trashy television."

"Ahh—" Jack replied, laughing. "If Max isn't the jealous type, then he won't mind if I came over and kept you company?"

Bitsie's mind failed to compute. Jack wanted to spend his Friday night sitting on her couch? He wanted to eat pizza out of a box and listen to her shout relationship advice—criticism, if she was going to be honest—at what passed for eligible bachelors these days?

"Uhm—sure," Bitsie replied, trying to sound casual, as if handsome younger men invited themselves over to her house all the time. It was just his way of being friendly, she decided. If she seriously thought he had any interest in her, she would have said no. She was not the kind of woman who invited men home in the early stages of a relationship, or at least she never had been. That was what was so confusing about being single after so many years. She wasn't sure what kind of woman she was. After being someone's wife for so long, it was hard to think of herself as anything else.

"Great!" said Jack. "What time should I come?"

"The shouting at the television generally begins at 7:35," said Bitsie. "What do you like on your pizza?"

That night Bitsie had a terrible time falling asleep. This insomnia thing was becoming a problem. She got up and made herself a cup of chamomile tea and stared out her kitchen window into her darkened back garden.

For a brief moment, she let herself wonder where Robert was and what he was doing but stopped herself. Robert wasn't hers to worry about anymore. It was no longer her problem if his twenty-five-year-old girlfriend took it into her head to leave him. In fact, Bitsie realized with surprise, there was no longer a part of her that wished that Robert would be unhappy. It wasn't a feeling that would last, but maybe it was a feeling that would make an appearance in her heart more often. Maybe, this was what it

felt like to forgive. Maybe, it was getting easier to feel forgiving because her new life as a single woman was turning out to be not so bad, not so bad at all.

She had her bakery. She had Max. She had Stan and Liz close by. She had her little house. And—she tried not to let herself get too excited about the last item on her list—she had a nondate with a lovely man on Friday night.

True, a dead electrician in her kitchen was not an auspicious start, but, at least, she'd been instrumental in bringing his killers to justice.

All anyone could ask for in this life, Bitsie thought, was to have something useful to do, a few good friends and a family who loved them. She had all of those things. She might be minus a husband, but that, she was finding, was one thing she could live without.

Her tea cup was empty. Max came into the kitchen, tail in the air and meowing loudly, demanding a midnight snack.

"I suppose, just a bit of kibble won't hurt you," Bitsie relented, as she poured a tiny serving of Svelte Kitty Cat Food, "reduced calories for your over-weight cat," into Max's bowl.

"We're not doing too badly, now are we?" she asked him. Max purred loudly, but he did not look up. He was too busy inhaling every last morsel of his Svelte Kitty Cat Food.

"If you're going to have a snack," Bitsie said to Max, "I'm going to have one, too."

She opened a container sitting on the counter and withdrew a cupcake.

"Chocolate cherry," she said to Max. "Just a new flavor I'm trying out."

Bitsie took a bite and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Needs just a touch more vanilla, I think."

Max looked solemnly up at her and then back at his empty dish and let out a plaintive meow. Clearly, he considered the size of his midnight snack insufficient.

"No," said Bitsie, licking chocolate frosting off her fingers and looking longingly at the remaining cupcakes in the container.

"No," she shook her head resolutely. "The second one never tastes quite as good as the first."

Max looked up at her and—if he had been human—would have let out a deep sigh. He stalked away from his bowl.

"No," said Bitsie. "All thing in moderation."

She smiled to herself and returned her gaze to the kitchen window. In the darkened back-garden she could just make out blobs of white on the bushes. The roses had started to bloom.

The End

Start Reading the Next Book

Cherry Chocolate Murder: Chapter One

"How did your date with Jack go last night?" Bitsie's sister-in-law asked her.

"Shh!" Bitsie protested. She looked furtively around the bakery kitchen. She and Liz were alone for the moment, but the man in question could decide to leave his post by the counter out front and walk through the kitchen door at any moment.

"What?" said Liz, trying to look innocent and not nearly succeeding. "Did I say something wrong?"

"It wasn't a date!" Bitsie insisted.

"I thought you went out to dinner and saw a movie afterwards," said Liz, refusing to be cowed by Bitsie's pleas for silence, but at least she lowered her voice.

"We did," said Bitsie, "but it wasn't a date."

"Dinner and a movie sure sounds a lot like a date," Liz insisted.

"Well, it wasn't!" said Bitsie firmly. "Jack and I are just friends."

"Oh, so you've friend-zoned him?"

"Certainly not," Bitsie said. In fact, if anyone was in a position to do any friend-zoning, it was Jack. Even aside from being far too young for her, Jack was clearly out of her league. "I don't think it ever entered his mind that I'd consider that a date," she said firmly.

Liz just raised one eye-brow and went back to pouring cherry chocolate batter into a cupcake pan. Normally, Liz didn't come to the bakery to help, but Bitsie's two regular bakers were out. Hector had a family funeral to go to, and Anabel had called in sick, although Bitsie didn't quite believe her story about having the flu. It might be flu season but was the third time Anabel had taken sick leave in the last three months. Three months was, coincidentally, the same length of time Anabel had been seeing her new boyfriend, James.

"Did Anabel call in sick a lot, back when you were running the bakery?" Bitsie asked Liz.

"No, hardly ever. I hired Anabel six years ago, and she's called in sick maybe half a dozen times."

"So once a year would be normal? That's not been my experience since I took over. Does it seem strange to you that she's been sick three times in the last three months?"

"Maybe she caught a nasty bug she just can't shake," Liz suggested.

Bitsie suspected that Anabel had caught a nasty bug that she just couldn't shake, and that nasty bug's name was James, but Bitsie didn't like to gossip, so she kept her suspicion to herself. The thing was, Anabel kept claiming to have the flu, but she never did show any lingering symptoms when she returned to work, although one time she had come back sporting a nasty bruise on one cheek. Anabel claimed to have gotten bruised when she ran into a tree limb while raking leaves in her yard, but it looked to Bitsie a lot more like she'd been punched. Another time, Bitsie had walked into the tiny staff bathroom when Anabel was washing her hands, and Anabel had hurriedly rolled her sleeves down, but not before Bitsie had caught a glimpse of what looked very much like greenish-purple marks on her arm where someone had grabbed her far too roughly.

Jack stuck his head into the kitchen and gave Bitsie a dazzling smile which Bitsie tried to return with casual friendliness. Yes, she and Jack were definitely in the friend-zone, not because she'd decided to put him there, but because that's where the two of them belonged.

"I'm taking off in a few minutes, after I close up," said Jack. "Will those cherry chocolate cupcakes be cool enough to box up? We sold out of them today."

"Going to see your granddad?" Liz asked.

"Every Tuesday," Jack replied. "I'm not allowed to show up empty-handed, either. Cherry chocolate is his new favorite flavor."

"I thought your grandfather didn't care for chocolate," said Bitsie.

"Ah, he doesn't, but apparently his new lady-love is crazy for it," said Jack.

"They do live down there at Shady Grove. Who knew that assisted-living was such a hotbed of romance?" Liz laughed.

"They're senior citizens, not dead citizens," said Bitsie, a bit too defensively. She refused to believe there was an expiration date on love.

"Assisted living isn't slowing Granddad down any in that department," said Jack. "He's managed to fall in love with three different women in the same space of time it's taken me to try and get over one."

Bitsie wanted to ask Jack to elaborate on that one woman he'd taken so long to get over—he must be talking about his exwife—but she stifled the impulse.

"Unfortunately," Jack continued, "the lady Granddad's enamored with can't seem to make up her mind about him."

"Why can't she?" said Bitsie. "Roscoe is a lovely man."

Bitsie had gone with Jack to visit his grandfather too many times to count in the six months she'd been back in Little Creek. Jack's grandfather Roscoe was a kind, handsome and quite mischievous gentleman of eighty-seven. He was exactly what Jack would be in forty-seven years: the same sparkling green eyes, the same wavy hair, although, hopefully Jack would keep more of his—Bitsie cut off her musing. Was it a bad sign that she'd moved on from admiring Jack's biceps—that was harmless enough—to imagining what he'd be like at eighty? Yes, it was a bad sign, she decided. It was only one small step away from imagining what it would be like to grow old with him, and that was truly dangerous ground.

"I guess Granddad has a sort of love-triangle going on," said Jack. "There's another man who's crazy about the same woman. He's some guy Granddad's never really liked, but what can he do? Says the guy's a real jerk, but I wouldn't be surprised if that's who the lady ends up going for. Women go for those overbearing types sometimes—" Jack trailed off, his mind elsewhere. Bitsie wondered if he was thinking about his exwife again. Had she left him for a jerk?

"So, your grandpa is plying her with cherry chocolate cupcakes in the hopes of winning her over?" Liz asked.

"Yes, although cupcakes don't seem to have gotten him very far with her, yet," Jack said. "You want to come with me, Bitsie? Granddad loves you. He's always threatening to steal you away—" Jack broke off suddenly.

When Bitsie and Jack had first met, six months before, Jack had been constantly flirting with her in a desultory way, as if it amused him to make her uncomfortable, but he never said flirtatious things to her anymore. Was he suddenly flirting with her again, or was it just his way of warning her that his grandfather thought that she and Jack were an item? Surely, the old man wouldn't think that.

"I'd love to see Roscoe," said Bitsie. "But I'll need a few minutes after closing to finish up some paper work."

"No problem," said Jack. "After we stop by to see Granddad, you want to grab a bite to eat?"

Bitsie tried to ignore the smirk that Liz was telegraphing in her direction. Thank goodness that Liz was standing behind Jack where he couldn't get a look at the smug expression on Liz's face.

It was nearly seven in the evening before they arrived at Shady Grove Assisted Living. Shady Grove was the only facility for seniors in the tiny town of Little Creek, Arkansas. Despite its name, there was no grove; there were hardly any trees. The sprawling brick building sat in the middle of an expanse of weedy grass, asphalt and a few poorly-tended flower-beds still containing the frosted remains of last summer's bedraggled petunias.

They found Roscoe in the common room playing cards with a man Bitsie recognized, but had never met.

"How are you feeling, Granddad?" Jack asked, as they sat down at the table.

"Not too bad."

"Not too bad?" Jack questioned him. "Mom called this morning and said they had to take you to the clinic yesterday."

"I'm fine," Roscoe insisted.

"Then why'd they take you in? Is your heart acting up again?"

Roscoe ignored his grandson and turned his attention to Bitsie.

"Bitsie," said Roscoe. "I don't believe you've met Malcom. Bitsie, meet Malcom Smith. Malcom, meet Bitsie George, my grandson's—" Roscoe broke off, and Bitsie looked over at Jack who was giving his grandfather a warning look. Apparently, Jack wasn't confident about how his grandfather would end that sentence.

"Friend!" Roscoe finished with a wink in Bitsie's direction. Bitsie tried not to look embarrassed and failed completely, but Malcom Smith, who'd barely acknowledged their presence when Jack and Bitsie sat down, merely grunted. Bitsie extended her hand, which Malcom took after hesitating a moment. He shook it roughly and then stood up and grunted again before stalking away from the table.

"Cheerful chap, isn't he?" said Jack to Bitsie.

"Terrible card player," said Roscoe, "but useful. He likes to play for money, and he always loses."

"They play for pennies," said Jack. "Malcom's biggest losing streak amounted to three dollars and seventy-four cents, or something like that."

Roscoe was laughing.

"Why do you persist in torturing the poor guy?" Jack asked. "You know how much he hates losing. Why don't you just let him win once in a while?"

"It's too much fun to watch him lose. Besides, he's such a weasel, he doesn't deserve to win."

Roscoe's face darkened. "I don't know what Lavinia sees in him."

"Miss Lavinia Fay still stringing you two gents along?" Jack asked.

"Like a couple of suckers," Roscoe replied. "You got the goods?" he asked, pointing to the box of cupcakes Bitsie held on her lap.

Bitsie handed over the cupcakes.

"Who is this Miss Fay?" she asked Roscoe as she looked around the room. Miss Fay must be quite the woman. Usually, in places like Shady Grove, the ratio of women to men was two to one, and if there was anyone getting fought over it was generally a man.

"Used to be a famous operatic soprano, or so I'm told," said Jack.

"Oh?"

"Used to be quite a beauty, too, in her day," Jack added.

"What are you talking about, 'in her day'? What an idiotic expression!" Roscoe interjected indignantly. "Lavinia is still a very beautiful woman. The problem with you young men is it that you don't know how to appreciate a mature—"

Bitsie interrupted and asked if there was any chance she might get to meet this famous Miss Fay in person.

"She'll be in later on," said Roscoe. "She always sits over there by the window."

He pointed at a seating area under some windows and next to a bookcase filled with old paperbacks and dog-eared board-games which Bitsie bet hardly anybody ever played.

Bitsie and Jack stayed for another half hour, but Miss Lavinia Fay did not make an appearance, and Roscoe kept the lid firmly closed on the cupcakes. Several other residents wandered by the table and looked longingly at the closed box.

Ruby Sheers, another friend of Roscoe's, came by the table and chatted away about nothing in an animated but distracted manner. She was friendly enough, but she came off as a bit daft and it was

obvious that she was more interested in the whereabouts of Malcom than she was in the people sitting at the table.

"I just don't know what women see in him," Roscoe sighed as they watched Ruby totter her way across the common area in the direction of Malcom's room.

Probably the same thing that Anabel saw in her no-good boyfriend James, Bitsie thought, whatever that was. Why did some women go for men they already knew were colossal jerks?

"Hungry?" asked Jack, looking at his watch. "We'd better go soon. It's almost eight, and they roll up the sidewalks around here in another half hour."

It was true, half the restaurants in town would already be closed.

"Bub's diner or Pietro's Pizza?" Jack asked. "Unless you want to drive all the way to Fayetteville—"

Bitsie didn't. Her feet hurt, and her cat Max was probably waiting impatiently at home for his dinner of diet kibble. Poor Max, he was always ready to eat, and it showed.

"Bub's diner," she said. "I love their honey-roasted ribs." Her mouth watered. She closed her eyes and imagined biting into one of those ribs.

She opened her eyes to see Jack smiling at her. When she stared back at him, he didn't break his gaze.

"What?" Bitsie demanded.

"Nothing," Jack said, laughing.

"If it's nothing, then why do you look so amused?"

"It's just this look you get on your face when you think about food. I've never seen anyone who enjoyed eating so much."

Bitsie looked down at her waistline and frowned. She and Max had a lot in common. She did enjoy eating, that was obvious by just looking at her figure. It wasn't that she was fat, exactly. In fact, in the last six months she'd even managed to shed a few pounds, but she was hardly what could be described as stream-lined.

"I'm not making fun of you," said Jack, looking genuinely concerned that he'd hurt her feelings.

"I know."

"I really like that you enjoy your food," he insisted. "After spending a decade married to a woman who counted every calorie—"

"She did, she really did. That woman was a calorie-counting fiend," Roscoe broke in. "Couldn't take her to a restaurant—"

"Granddad—"

"She'd order salad without dressing, toast without butter, pizza without cheese—"

"Granddad!"

"Doggone nearly wasted away to noth—"

"We'd better go," said Bitsie, hastily. Jack never talked about his ex, and she'd never pressed him to. The only thing Bitsie knew about her was that her name was Tracy, and, when she and Jack had broken up, Tracy had moved away to Nebraska.

Some things in the past were better left in the past, Bitsie thought. She certainly had memories of her marriage to Robert that she'd rather not talk about.

Bitsie was just taking that first heavenly bite of honey-roasted ribs at Bub's diner when Jack's phone rang.

"Hi, Granddad. How were the—"

There was a lot of talking on Roscoe's end, which Bitsie couldn't hear. When Jack finally hung up, his face was ashen.

"What is it?" Bitsie asked.

"It's bad."

"What's bad?"

"It's really bad."

"You're going to have to say a bit more than that."

"You remember Malcom?"

"The cranky guy Roscoe plays cards with?"

"Yeah, he just collapsed and nearly died."

"Is he going to be OK?"

"Granddad thinks so."

It was sad, of course, but she didn't understand why Jack seemed so shaken. It wasn't as if he was fond of Malcom. He must know that old people collapsed all the time. She'd once lived across from a nursing home, and it seemed like every time she'd looked out her living room window, there'd been an ambulance there, taking someone away.

"There's more," Jack continued.

"Oh?"

"He collapsed right after eating one of those cupcakes we brought over."

"I don't see—"

"It looks like it was the cupcake that nearly did him in. One of the staff nurses was there when he collapsed, and she noticed that the cupcake he'd been eating had been tampered with."

"Tampered with? You mean someone put something in his cupcake?"

"There was some yellow powder in it. Roscoe saw the whole thing. He took a look at that cupcake too, before the paramedics told the nurse to bag it up. He says it looked like someone took a cupcake, hollowed out the middle and put yellow powder in it. Then they must have glued the whole thing back together with frosting."

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